THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN THE THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

by

Glen Harold Stassen

Department of Religion
Duke University

Date: April 25, 1967

Approved:

Waldo Beach
Waldo Beach, Supervisor

John H. Hallowell

Frederick Herzog

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Department of Religion
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ABSTRACT

(Religion)

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The sovereignty of God is the central theme of H. Richard Niebuhr's theology and ethics. To study its meaning for the development of his thought is the purpose of the dissertation.

Niebuhr's doctoral dissertation examined Ernst Troeltsch's pioneering work on the problems of relativism and subjectivism. These problems have now become the basic elements in the encounter between theology and secularization—for example, in Harvey Cox's writings. Because Niebuhr confronted these problems before he developed his understanding of the sovereignty of God, his way of speaking of God is increasingly helpful in the current discussion; he had a forty-year head start.

Niebuhr accepts relativism as friendly to the sovereignty of God and works within its limits. The sovereignty of God means that God is the power that rules in all realms of existence, that God is independent from all relative human values including those of moral idealism and religious subjectivism, and that God reveals Himself and His character with knowable content within relative history.

Neo-Protestant theology bases knowledge of God on an understand-

ing of revelation as existential encounter. The lack of content in this encounter, however, is a serious flaw. What does man know about God after the encounter? What concrete content results from an encounter? The seriousness of this flaw, this lack of content, has increased with time and use in the tensions of the twentieth century.

H. Richard Niebuhr avoids the weaknesses that produce the flaw because his social existentialism provides a different understanding of revelation--still existential and relative but filled with content. His social existentialism enables his description of the character of God's action to be concrete.

Niebuhr's understanding of revelation has major implications for theology and ethics, but it seems not to have been understood. Even Hans Frei's excellent essay misses the implications of social existentialism for revelation, and the result is a misunderstanding of Niebuhr's position on value-theory and on the power and goodness of God.

Niebuhr adapts Troeltsch's method for validating theology and ethics within the limits of relativism, "in the lab of history." With the help of Troeltsch, Barth, and Bergson, he discovers that whenever the sovereignty of God has been taken seriously in American Protestantism, the historical consequence has been impressive ethical responsibility and a transforming relation between Christ and culture. The prophetic faith in the sovereign God dissolves the spiritualistic dualism of subjective moralism and pietism; faith in the sovereign God engenders ethical responsibility in all realms of life; it maintains a prophetic tension between itself and all finite powers and values; and it produces revolutionary transformation of man's culture and his selfhood.

The sovereignty of God provides Niebuhr's basic norms for realistic interpretation and ethical response in the situation of decision. His occasional essays on problems of nationalism and war display his ethics of response in specific engagement with major issues and events of our time. In the 1950's, however, his norms become somewhat abstract.

Most of the causes of the abstractness are only situational and temporary. A serious problem in Niebuhr's thought, however, is the conflict between the power and the goodness of God. This conflict must and can be resolved for Niebuhr's ethics to proceed. The omnipotence of God must be qualified by His strategy of reconciliation within relative history. Niebuhr himself begins the resolution along these lines in The Responsible Self, and outlines the route for the further development of his theology and ethics.

PREFACE

"The old theological phrase, 'the sovereignty of God,' indicates what is for me fundamental."[1] Thus H. Richard Niebuhr identifies the foundation of his theology and ethics. The "most memorable theme in his course of lectures on Christian ethics" is:"'Responsibility affirms--God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.'"[2] To understand Niebuhr one must understand the meaning of the sovereignty of God in his thought.

Our method for understanding Niebuhr takes its clue from his method for understanding American Christianity: "We need to take our stand within the movement so that its objects may come into view."[3] He argues for a method of "inner history" not because Christian faith is an exception to historical relativism but precisely because of historical relativism.

> No movement can be understood until its presuppositions, the fundamental faith upon which it rests, have been at least provisionally adopted. The presuppositions may not be our own; we may find good reason for rejecting them in favor of others; but we cannot understand without occupying a standpoint, and there is no greater barrier to understanding than the as-

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," *Christian Century*, LXXVII (March 2, 1960), 248.

[2] H. R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York, 1963), pp. 25 and 125-26.

[3] *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York, 1959), p. 12.

> sumption that the standpoint which we happen to occupy is a universal one, while that of the object of our criticism is relative.[1]

The task of the present study is to understand the meaning of the sovereignty of God for Niebuhr's thought; the method of the study is to seek that meaning from his standpoint, within the movement of his theology and ethics.

Niebuhr's thought is a movement, not a static system. What he says of Christianity applies to his own theology and ethics: "It is gospel rather than law, it is more dynamic than static." Its genius "does not appear in its ethical programs any more than in its doctrinal creeds, important as these may be at times; these are abstractions from its life and become fetters when they are not recognized as abstractions." If Niebuhr's thought, like the Christianity he describes, finds its focus in the sovereignty of God, then it can only be movement. "Since its goal is the infinite and eternal God, only movement or life directed toward the ever transcendent can express its meaning."[2]

But the movement has a consistent direction. It is "a never-ending pilgrim's progress of the reasoning Christian heart."[3] Its route shifts in response to the situations it encounters, but it follows an orderly and coherent plan.

Our study treats his thought accordingly. Each section begins anew with Niebuhr's early writings and indicates something of the progression of his thought on the problem under consideration. And because his thought is not only movement but purposeful and orderly progression, each section of the study seeks to illuminate the consistent pattern of Niebuhr's response to the problem. Thus history of development and analysis of pattern are inseparable. And because Niebuhr asks us to "take our stand within the movement so that its objects may come into view," we can not stop at analysis. We must enter into dialogue with him, asking ourselves how we see the objects toward which he is pointing. Thus history and analysis grow into dialogue and criticism. Perhaps a few hints about the direction the dialogue takes can make it easier to follow.

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

[3] H. R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York, 1941), p. 137.

Since the sovereignty of God is the central theme of Niebuhr's thought, it leads into all of his main concerns. Three of his most important concerns are the description of man's knowledge of God within the limits of relativism, the relation between Christ and culture, and the normative character of God's action for ethical response. All three are central in Niebuhr's writings from the beginning to the end of his career. Furthermore, they fit together nicely to display the movement and pattern of his thought. Therefore I have chosen to concentrate on these three concerns as they relate to the sovereignty of God, and have divided the study into three sections.

Within these three sections, there are two themes that recur and that deserve special notice. The first theme is Niebuhr's answer to historical relativism. This is the explicit emphasis in the first section of the study, but it is also implicit in the other sections. Niebuhr accepts the limits of relativism with unusual fullness and explicitness almost before his career begins. He develops a method for validation of theology and ethics by "testing within the lab of history." He defines the sovereignty of God as independent from possession by any human perspective--with such vigorous consistency that a corollary of the sovereignty of God is the relativity of all human perspectives. And finally, he develops an understanding of revelation based on his social existentialism that corrects errors in other more individualistic understandings of existentialism, and that enables him to speak of faith in God whose trustworthiness is disclosed with specific and knowable content within relative history. All this is the explicit emphasis of the first section of our study. But the second and third sections also extend Niebuhr's answer to relativism. The second section demonstrates how he uses history as the lab for testing theology and ethics. The third section concentrates on the specific character and location of God's action as Niebuhr perceives it within relative history. Here Niebuhr answers the question, what sort of knowledge-content does historically conditioned man receive from God's self-revelation?

Another theme also runs through all three sections: the togetherness of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God removes causes of irresponsibility and engenders human ethical responsibility. For example, his theocentric response to relativism overcomes the threat of irresponsible forms of subjectivism. His transformationism corrects some irresponsible ways of relating Christ and culture. His description of the normative character of God's action within the situation of response provides firmer guidelines than are present in many forms of situational ethics. In these ways and others that become obvious in the study, the sovereignty of God and responsible selfhood belong together in Niebuhr's thought.

Discussing these themes naturally leads into the midst of present theological debate about our understanding of God. I think Niebuhr makes some crucial, necessary, vital, essential contributions to the ongoing dialogue. My focus is on Niebuhr rather than on all of the continuing debate; but some of his contributions seem vital enough that I can hardly refrain from beginning to indicate their increasing relevance.

Perhaps the reader should be warned of two things that are not attempted here. Focusing on Niebuhr's central theme, showing its development from his early interests, and attempting to delineate some of its implications for his major concerns and for some of the present debate, hopefully provide something of an introduction to Niebuhr's theology and ethics. But my intention has been never to summarize, only to interpret and argue. Niebuhr writes so carefully and reads so well that I have been constantly tempted to discard my own words and to quote long passages of his; but I have never been tempted to try to provide a summary that could serve as an alternative to reading Niebuhr. Therefore my discussion of The Meaning of Revelation, for example, is not to be taken as an attempt to represent a fair balance of all his intentions in that work. Rather it is an attempt to analyze, illuminate, and engage in dialogue with some of the major intentions and presuppositions. Furthermore, in choosing to concentrate on implications of the sovereignty of God for revelation, for Christ and culture, and for the ethics of response, I have had to neglect some other major concerns of Niebuhr's. His analysis of human selfhood and of the nature of the church, for example, are not treated with full justice. They are certainly in mind throughout the study, but they deserve fuller treatment.

Professor Daniel Day Williams first introduced me to the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr in the summer of 1959. Dr. Williams suggested that Niebuhr's answer to the questions I was then facing was careful, perceptive, and important. Ever since then, my gratitude to Dr. Williams has been steadily growing. Niebuhr has provided such a responsible, sensitive, solidly grounded, and carefully constructed theological ethics that a myriad of my questions have fallen into place. Furthermore, I have had an unusually good experience for dissertation writers: I have never grown tired of wrestling with Niebuhr's careful thought; sometimes I have been frustrated by my own slowness, but never by him. I am also grateful to Dr. Williams for his early clues to the interpretation of Niebuhr. After having worked hard and long to develop my own understanding of Niebuhr, and after having discovered at least one major disagreement with almost all of Niebuhr's interpreters, I have been repeatedly surprised to find that I have only arrived where Dr. Williams pointed in the first place. It is like *déjà vu*; I was not conscious of all those early clues as I concentrated only on Niebuhr, but after the results were in, Dr. Williams published two brief but perceptive articles on Niebuhr that recalled his early and penetrating hints and that said what I was trying to say.[1] Finally I am grateful to Dr. Williams for sensitive personal counsel and for the excitement of his teaching.

A course taught by Dr. Waldo Beach in contemporary Christian theological ethics convinced me that Niebuhr has the answer to problems that are causing serious difficulties for others. The dissertation arose out of this conviction. Dr. Beach directed the dissertation, and he provided wise counsel on three matters, at least the first two of which should give the reader cause for sharing my gratitude: he shortened the dissertation by narrowing its scope; he improved the style and clarified the content by particular suggestions and gentle pressure; and he patiently prodded me to get it done.

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[1] Daniel Day Williams, "A Personal and Theological Memoir," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXIII (November 25, 1963), 209-13; and Williams, review of *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XVII (November, 1961), 99-101.

It should not seem unusual that Dr. Hans Hillerbrand, whose specialty is Reformation and Modern European Christianity, should be a special object of gratitude for such a study as this. His incisive probings into the political ethics of Luther and of the Anabaptists, into the theological foundations and the historical results of Protestant attempts to formulate a political ethics, were always before me as I thought of the sovereignty of God, the Word and the world, and the problems of subjective dualism. The strength of the sovereignty of God in the wide Protestant tradition, and the weakness of subjective and dualistic distortions of that tradition, have impressed me deeply in historical studies stimulated by Dr. Hillerbrand's incisive guidance.

I feel what H. Richard Niebuhr has written: "When a work has been so long in preparation the debts accumulated by the author are so many and so great that public acknowledgment is embarrassing since it must reveal his lack of adequate gratitude as well as of adequate ability to appropriate the gifts that have been offered him."[1] I should like especially to express thanks for insights and stimulus to Professors H. Shelton Smith, Frederick Herzog, John Hallowell, Creighton Lacy, and William Poteat; and to Professors Paul Lehmann and Robert Lynn for reading my B. D. thesis and for graciously encouraging me to follow through on that beginning. An unusually close and stimulating community of colleagues and fellow graduate students has been a special source of criticism, suggestion, sharpening, barbs, and aid of various sorts. I think particularly of Ken Brown, Lonnie Kliever, Spencer Ludlow, Dan McGee, Pat Murray, and "the community in dispersion." I feel a special sort of gratitude to my colleagues at Kentucky Southern College for the gift of a sense of freedom and community that make one feel ready to be creative even if he isn't. Ronald Crossley and my sister, Kathleen Berger, each made helpful suggestions on two of the chapters. They and Dr. Beach seemed never to give up the vain hope that the grace and style of a Minnesota plow horse could be coaxed into resembling that of a Kentucky thoroughbred. Miss Bessie Chronaki had more important things to do than to type the final manuscript, and her rare spirit has been an even greater source of joy than her very special competence. Mr. Donn Michael Farris and the Duke University Library staff are unusual in their desire and ability to please the harried and forgetful researcher. I am grateful for a Duke University Graduate Fellowship and a Lilly Foundation Fellowship, and for a generous Gurney Harriss Kearns fellowship which sustained us for a year of uninterrupted study.

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[1] Christ and Culture, p. xi.

I dedicated my B. D. thesis to Dorothy Patience Stassen. The patience of my wife has now suffered through four more years of typing the illegible, confronting my preoccupied absentmindedness, raising two children with unimaginable energy, and other unmentionable tribulations and joys common and uncommon for wives whose husbands write while teaching. There is no sense even trying to describe the extent of my ever-increasing debt to her.

--Glen Stassen
Kentucky Southern College
April, 1967

To those through whom a dream is beginning
to happen at Kentucky Southern College, for
community, freedom, and light.

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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN THE THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

PART ONE

MAN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY WITHIN THE LIMITS OF RELATIVISM

CHAPTER I

SECULARIZATION, RELATIVISM, AND SUBJECTIVISM

"How do we speak in a secular fashion of God?"[1] This question, first raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and since echoed by many others, has been understood and answered in widely differing ways. Its meaning is not univocal. But whatever it means, its importance is clear. In The Secular City, for example, Harvey Cox asks how to speak of God in a secular age—and he sees this as the main question for theology now: "The word God means almost nothing to modern secular man. His mental world . . . is such that he can neither understand nor use the word God meaningfully. . . . It is clear that we must deal with this painful question of Bonhoeffer satisfactorily or all that we have said so far becomes implausible."[2]

Bonhoeffer's question points to the importance of H. Richard Niebuhr's theology and ethics. Long before Bonhoeffer asked about secularization and God, Niebuhr was working out a thorough, sensitive, and responsible answer. Although secularization did not achieve its widespread theological interest until after Niebuhr's death, Niebuhr confronted it before others were aware of it.[1] He spent a lifetime of careful and thoughtful work on the problems of historical relativism, human responsibility, and their relation to the sovereignty of God, and these are the basic problems that Cox defines when he describes the impact of secularization. Cox began to write about these problems in the 1960's; Bonhoeffer's prison letters began to focus on them in the 1940's;[2] and Niebuhr began to wrestle with them explicitly and directly as early as the 1920's. Niebuhr, in other words, was ahead of his time.

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[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as quoted in Harvey Cox, The Secular City (New York, 1965), p. 241.

[2] Secular City, p. 241.

Harvey Cox and Secularization

One way to notice the pioneering and prophetic character of Niebuhr's thought is to look briefly at Harvey Cox's book, _The Secular City_. Cox's analysis of the relation between God and the secular employs Niebuhr's insights and terminology. Cox quotes Niebuhr and acknowledges Niebuhr's influence upon his thought.[3] But more than this, Cox bases his study of secularization on two fundamental human experiences that Niebuhr spent a lifetime exploring. The first is historical relativism; the second is defatalization.

The beginning, middle, and end of secularization is historical relativism. "Secularization," Cox begins, "occurred only when the cosmopolitan confrontation of city living exposed the relativity of the myths and traditions men once thought were unquestionable."[1] The three essential elements in the process of secularization are the relativization of nature, of politics, and of values.[2] And finally, "Historical relativism is the end product of secularization."[3]

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[1] This will be shown below.

[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, _Letters and Papers From Prison_ (London and Glasgow, 1953), especially pp. 78-79, 90-94, 101-32.

[3] For example, see _Secular City_, pp. 30ff. and 273; Cox, _God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility_ (Valley Forge, 1965), p. 10.

His description of historical relativism is one place where Cox is especially indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr, for it is basically a summary of Niebuhr's description in The Meaning of Revelation:

> The awareness that his own point of view is relative and conditioned has become for secular man an inescapable component of that point of view. His consciousness has been relativized. He knows that not only his language, his customs, and his clothing style, but also his science, his values, and his very way of perceiving reality are conditioned by his personal biography and the history of his group.[4]

In Cox's description of secularization, the second fundamental experience is "defatalization." This is

> the discovery by man that he has been left with the world on his hands, that he can no longer blame fortune or the furies for what he does with it. Secularization is man turning his attention away from worlds beyond and toward this world and this time (saeculum = "this present age"). It is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1944 called "man's coming of age."[5]

Defatalization, in other words, is the discovery of human responsibility for this world. It denies any concept of divine sovereignty that con-

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1. Secular City, p. 1.

2. Ibid., pp. 21-36.

3. Ibid., p. 33.

4. Ibid., p. 30. See also p. 33, n. 6, and cf. Meaning of Revelation, pp. 7-20.

5. Secular City, p. 2.

flicts with human responsibility. It raises the fundamental question of the relation between the sovereignty of God and responsible selfhood--a question central to all of Niebuhr's thought.

Man's whole context is historically relative and defatalized. Man is now secular. The question, then, is what man's secular situation means for speaking of God. One aspect of that question is the question of religion. What is the place of religion in a secular age?

Cox rejects religion. Under the impact of secularization, religion has become privatized and subjective. Secularization forces religion to admit that it is not universal but relative. Therefore religion can no longer claim to possess a closed world-view that gives universally inclusive answers to ultimate questions.[1] Secularization defatalizes religion. Religion can not claim to describe or propitiate otherworldly deities that control our life in this world.[2] Deprived of universality and otherworldliness, religion retreats into introspective subjectivism.

> Secularization simply bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things. It has relativized religious world-views and thus rendered them innocuous. Religion has been privatized. It has been accepted as the peculiar prerogative and point of view of a particular person or group. Secularization has accomplished what fire and chain could not: It has convinced the believer that he _could_ be wrong, and persuaded the devotee that there are more important things than dying for the faith. The gods of traditional religions live on as private fetishes or the patrons of congenial groups, but they play no role whatever in the public life of the secular metropolis.[3]

The important point to be noticed here is this: when Cox speaks of religion he has a particular kind of religion in mind. He is speaking of privatized, subjective religion—religion abdicating the public world of human responsibility. He distinguishes this from its opposite: the prophetic faith in the God of Exodus and Easter who calls man into responsibility in the world of revolution and reconciliation.

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[1] _Ibid_., pp. 3, 20-21, 69, 253.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 2, 17, 61-70, 154, 248.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 2.

In God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility, Cox describes "four components of 'religion,'" all of which "have been abolished and broken down by Jesus of Nazareth."[1] The first is "cultic worship, the gathering at stated times and places for ritually prescribed activity." He contrasts this with the nonreligious worship of the early Christians, which "was very much like what we do at a meal with friends and co-workers. This is not the ritual propitiation of a deity. It is the celebration of what God is doing in our world and of our privilege of being there with him." The second component of religion abolished by Jesus of Nazareth is "otherworldliness, the effort to escape the world in which God has placed us." The third is "a division between the sacred and the secular." The fourth is "an inclusive worldview," such as is involved in the Communist or the capitalist ideology.[2] These four components define a kind of religion that has not come to terms with relativism and defatalization, a religion that is retreating from worldly responsibility into a sacred, cultic, or subjective realm.

Then how shall we speak of God in the midst of historical relativism? If the whole context of man's life is conditioned by his society and by his location in the stream of history, if his place in

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1. Cox, God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility, p. 105.

2. Ibid. Cf. p. 107.

the universe, his relation to his society, his own values and his way of perceiving reality are all historically relative, if in short he himself is relativized, then how shall he speak of God? Is God a private and relative loyalty who belongs only in a private and subjective realm? Has God gone the way of privatized religion? Is He not so much dead as relegated to a subjective realm of worldly irrelevance?

The defatalizing aspect of secularization raises the second question for speaking of God: How does the sovereignty of God relate to human responsibility? If all of life has been defatalized, if man has so come of age that the principalities and powers are toppled from their thrones and man himself has the world in his hands, and if the responsibility of being responsible has placed its full weight on man's shoulders, then how does man's responsibility relate to God? Must God abdicate his sovereignty for man to be given responsibility? Does the sovereign God guide human responsibility or is man alone as he picks his way amongst the relativities?

> The man who has moved beyond tribal culture and its town or bourgeois afterglow knows that he must bear a burden the people of those eras never bore. He must live with the realization that the rules which guide his ethical life will seem just as outmoded to his descendants as some of his ancestors' practices now appear to him. No previous generation has had to live in the glaring light of this realization. Simple ethical certainty, of the sort once available to man, will never be possible again.[1]

In the midst of ethical relativity, does the living God illumine the path of responsibility?

Cox provides a number of clues for speaking of God in The Secular City, and he develops the clues further in his other book, God's Revolu-

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1. *Ibid*., p. 31.

tion and Man's Responsibility. Many, though not all, of his suggestions point to H. Richard Niebuhr's way of speaking. For example, Cox describes responsibility as response to what is going on in the world; he advocates a more social version of Martin Buber's existentialism; he speaks of the faithfulness of God in action in our history and of our participation in that action. He speaks of the church's scrutiny of "the issues the society confronts in light of those decisive events of the past—Exodus and Easter—in which the intent of God has been apprehended by man in faith. Thus the church looks to the hints God has dropped in the past in order to make out what He is doing today."[1] Cox speaks of the sovereignty of God and of the content of God's revolution in terms of reconciliation, liberation, and hope. "Biblical faith is not distinguished by the fact that its people worship, but by reconciliation, by freedom, by hope, by its demonstration of God's shalom."[2] All of these emphases are central to H. Richard Niebuhr's theology and ethics. Niebuhr has already worked out much of their meaning with care and sensitivity.

In the 1920's and 1930's, Niebuhr was already pioneering in the territory where we are now only beginning to grope our way. Furthermore, he brought unusual wisdom and balance to the task. The route that he mapped out may have become unusually helpful for our present attempts to find our way to an understanding of God and of human responsibility. He may still be well ahead of us, and we may have much to learn from him. Part of the credit for this belongs to

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[1] Secular City, p. 254.

[2] God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility, p. 98 and chaps. 1, 3, and 5; Secular City, pp. 31-36, 47-49, 65-66, 116-122, 125ff., 242, 254, 256, and 259.

Ernst Troeltsch and Historical Relativism

Troeltsch's wrestle with historical relativism was his most obvious influence on Niebuhr's thought. Niebuhr's doctoral dissertation was a study of Troeltsch's philosophy of religion, and in this study he confronted Troeltsch's full articulation of the problems of relativism.[1] The date of the dissertation was 1924. Niebuhr later wrote that "No other influence has affected twentieth century thought more deeply than the discovery of spatial and temporal relativity."[2]

What, then, is relativism? Put simply, relativism is "the understanding that the spatio-temporal point of view of an observer enters into his knowledge of reality, so that no universal knowledge of things as they are in themselves is possible, so that all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower."[3] Both knower and known are a part of the changing stream of history and are subject to the limitations imposed by that stream.

> It is not enough to say that men live in time and must conceive all things as temporal and historical. Doubtless it is true that all reality has become temporal for us. But our historical relativism affirms the historicity of the subject even more than that of the object; man, it points out, is not only in time but time is in man. Moreover and more significantly, the time that is in man is not abstract but particular and concrete; it is not a general category of time but rather the time of a definite society with distinct

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1924).

[2] Meaning of Revelation, p. 7.

[3] Ibid.

language, economic and political relations, religious faith and social organization.[1]

Troeltsch believed relativism is important not merely because it is a universal influence upon all thinkers in our culture, but because it is undermining the roots of ethical guidance and meaningful purpose. This erosion would be serious enough in tranquil times, but in our era it threatens life itself. Troeltsch was intensely aware of the threats to human civilization that are present in the twentieth century.

> He lived and thought in the presence of the confusions and alarms, the hopes and threats that issue from class and party conflict, church and state tensions, international wars remembered and impending, from colonial imperialisms and rising nationalisms, from industrialism growing in extent and in power over the common life, from the spectacular development of the natural and social sciences, from the radical criticism of modern civilization by Marx and Nietzsche.[2]

He could hardly have been more conscious that such times desperately need a strong basis for hope, meaning, and ethical decision. And his studies convinced him that no socially effective basis for ethics is possible without religion. He described his life as a search for a "vital and effective religious position, which could alone furnish my life with a centre of reference for all practical questions, and could alone give meaning and purpose to reflection upon the things of this world."[3]

Niebuhr was determined to continue the search Troeltsch had begun. He maintained that ethical principles without firm and deep religious roots are far too weak to resist the threats of our times. He believed

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1. _Ibid_., p. 13.

2. Niebuhr, "Introduction to the Torchbook Edition," Ernst Troeltsch, _The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches_ (New York, 1960), p. 8.

3. Ernst Troeltsch, _Christian Thought_ (London, 1923), p. 5.

recent attempts at ethics without religion had demonstrated their own failure by hollowness and decay. "So far as the winning of a general set of principles is concerned, upon which men can build the structure of their social life—principles similar to the foundations of science—ethics without religion has made little progress."[1] The result of ethics without religion has been a moral anarchy in which each social institution has become a law unto itself. The failure of the prevalent ethics-without-foundation shows up in its relativism, and in its unconscious borrowing of what foundation it has from Christianity.[2] For these reasons Niebuhr maintained that the important questions in the world crisis of the forties were not only political, but fundamentally religious questions about the context of political actions.[3] For Niebuhr, effective ethics and vital religion are inseparable. Therefore the Christian faith can not hope to be ethically relevant without paying careful attention to its life-giving religious, theological, and historical roots.

This is why both Niebuhr and Troeltsch were so greatly concerned with relativism. They saw the relativism that is a shared assumption of our century as one of the most important forces eroding the foundation of the religious and ethical structure of life. Both Niebuhr and Troeltsch accepted the truth of relativism, and they both saw it as a major problem for any persuasive ethical norms. In his doctoral dissertation, Niebuhr wrote of

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[1] Niebuhr, "Religion and Ethics," World Tomorrow, XIII (November, 1930), 443-44. Cf. Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York, 1951), p. 76.

[2] Niebuhr, "Religion and Ethics," pp. 444 and 446.

[3] Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis," Christianity and Society, VI (Summer, 1941), 11.

> the problem which concerned [Troeltsch] more than anything else, the problem of the antithesis between the relativity of all historical entities so of Christianity, and the absoluteness of conviction with which the value of such historical entities might force itself upon one. Out of the clash between historical relativity and religious certitude his philosophy issued.[1]

The implications of historical relativism become clear as soon as the questions of truth and authority are asked. Several possible foundations for religious certitude were advocated in nineteenth century theology. But each of these was destroyed by the overpowering modern awareness that all historical entities, including Christianity, are historically conditioned and are changing with time.

One foundation for religious certitude is the claim of authentication by miracle. Miracle is basic not only for the old supernaturalism but also for modern Schleiermacherian and Ritschlian theology. Modern theology bases itself on an inner miracle whenever it claims an inner experience or an inner awareness that is not subject to the relativities of history.[2] The authority of such miracles is that they

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1. Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 219. Also see ibid., p. 4, and Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought, pp. 4-8 and 39-40.

2. Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 44-45: "It is the essence of the old supernaturalist theology that it possesses an authority, which is authoritative just because it is isolated from the whole historical nexus, from analogy with the remainder of historical process, and which is therefor [sic] placed beyond the reach of historical criticism and the uncertainty of its results. The proof of such authority is eventually always a miracle, whether historical or psychological, in the past origin of the faith or in the present experience of the believer. History is thus divided into a non-miraculous region subject to historical-critical investigation, and a miraculous region to be explored only by means of inner experience and after humble self-abnegation by reason." See also Troeltsch, Christian Thought, pp. 9-10, and Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben (Tübingen, 1911), pp. 11ff.

are beyond historical relativity and beyond criticism by historical investigation; but such authority is precisely what is denied by our historical age. This is readily seen as soon as one understands clearly the relativism of three presuppositions essential to historical method: (1) "the critical method in history means that no absolute certainty but only probability can attach to judgments about historical facts"; (2) "the use of analogy presupposes the uniformity of all historical processes and includes Christian history in the historical evolution"; and (3) "the principle of correlation posits the unity and interdependence of all spiritual life."[1] As Niebuhr pointed out, "The result of the application of this method to religious history will necessarily be the relativisation of every individual event or fact."[2]

If we must presuppose the uniformity and interdependence of all historical processes, then miracles must happen throughout history if they happen anywhere in history. Miracles can not be limited to one special region of history. Therefore a claim to authority based on a uniquely miraculous region of history or of experience can not be accepted by a historically relative age.

Troeltsch saw no objection to a religion that claims supernatural events in its history, events that reveal something more than man or nature, so long as one recognizes the presence of such elements in all religions.[3] Exclusivism was what he rejected, not the miraculous.

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[1] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 49; cf. Ernst Troeltsch, Christian Thought, p. 12; Ernst Troeltsch, "The Dogmatics of the 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,'" American Journal of Theology, XVII (January, 1913), 1-2.

[2] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 49.

[3] Ibid., p. 47.

Historical relativism must reject "that exclusive kind of supernaturalism which claims a miraculous origin for one religion while denying it to others."[1] But this undercuts any claim to authority based on a uniquely miraculous set of events. If all religions have an equal claim to miracle, then no one religion can claim it is more authoritative because of its own miracles.

The second method of authentication, to which Troeltsch himself turned during one period of his career, is the Hegelian attempt to discover a universal religion of salvation which is implicit in all religion and which reaches its highest peak in Christianity.[2]

> According to this view Christianity is simply the perfected expression of religion as such. In the universal process of the unfolding of Spirit, the fundamental impulse towards salvation and communion with God overcomes all the limitations of sense experience, of the natural order, of mythological form, until it attains perfect expression in Christianity . . .[3]

Christianity is universal, implicit in all religion, the fulfillment of the universal spirit of all religion, and therefore is supremely authoritative.[4] This claim is likewise undermined by historical relativism.

> The actual history of religion knows nothing of the common character of all religions, or of their natural upward trend towards Christianity. It . . . discovers certain irresolvable contradictions between these world-religions themselves which render their ultimate fusion and reconciliation in Christianity highly improbable, either

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 47; Troeltsch, "Empiricism and Platonism in the Philosophy of Religion," *Harvard Theological Review*, V (October, 1912), 402-03.

[2] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 50-56.

[3] Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, pp. 10-11.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16; cf. "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 232ff.

> in theory or practice. Moreover, Christianity is itself a theoretical abstraction. It presents no historical uniformity, but displays a different character in every age, and is, besides, split up into many different denominations. . . . [Christianity is] a particular, independent, historical principle, containing, similarly to the other principles, very diverse possibilities and tendencies.[1]

Niebuhr completely accepted Troeltsch's critique of any authority based on a unique or universal and non-relative experience. Indeed, Niebuhr saw historical relativism as a corollary of the sovereignty of God. Historical relativism is a check against the idolatrous tendency to absolutize the relative and to substitute it for the One who is alone absolute, alone sovereign.[2]

Niebuhr began his most important statement of theological method by pointing out the problems and dilemmas that historical relativism poses for theology in our century.[3] He unequivocally affirmed the twentieth-century "realization that the point of view which a man occupies in regarding religious as well as any sort of reality is of profound importance."[4] Therefore, "no universal knowledge of things as they are in themselves is possible."[5]

> There does not seem then to be any apparent possibility of escape from the dilemma of historical relativism for any type of theology. The historical point of view of the observer must be taken into consideration in every case since no observer can get out of history into a realm beyond time-space.[6]

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1. Troeltsch, Christian Thought, p. 13.

2. Niebuhr, "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," Religious Realism, edited by D. C. Macintosh (New York, 1931), p. 428; Meaning of Revelation, p. 40.

3. Meaning of Revelation, p. 6.

4. Ibid., pp. 6-7.

5. Ibid., p. 7.

6. Ibid., p. 16.

As did Troeltsch, Niebuhr criticized the various attempts to claim special authority by exempting one's own viewpoint from relativism while applying it to all other viewpoints.[1] Just as Troeltsch did, Niebuhr set aside the claim to universality for truths that Christians possess.[2] Indeed, he positively opposed such claims as usurpations of the sovereignty of God and as sources of many errors in Christian theology.[3] And he consistently affirmed that the things we know in Christian faith are not static, eternal verities but particular historical manifestations. The living God reveals Himself within particular historical situations. He is not possessed as an eternal truth but is repeatedly present in new ways in contemporary events.[4]

Historical relativism means that the objects of all confessions must be events, happenings, realities in history.[5] Niebuhr contended that anything not present in history and subject to historical investigation is not a reality for an age of historical relativism. He was astonished at dogmatic methods that seek to pass beyond human experience as, for example, Henry W. Clark had seemed to do:

> His [Clark's] interest in objectivity leads him to make the astonishing and often repeated affirmation that the atonement must be understood from "God's standpoint." By this phrase he does not mean that the atonement enables us to see ourselves in the presence of God and His holiness, but that a theory of the atonement

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[1] Ibid., p. 12.

[2] Ibid., pp. 27-42.

[3] Ibid., pp. 27-42, and especially p. 40; D. D. Williams, "A Personal and Theological Memoir," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (November 25, 1963), 211-12.

[4] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 13, 41, 141, 167-68, et passim. This will be discussed later in further detail.

[5] Ibid., pp. 43-44, and p. 53.

> can somehow be gained in abstraction from human experience. "The effort to stand with God," he says, "is really an effort to pass beyond human experience as we know it to that out of which human experience came." . . . an effort to determine what "must have been God's purpose" in creating the world, which implies the assumption that by some legerdemain of reason it is possible for man to think as the Eternal does. . . . it is the old high and dry a priori method which proceeds deductively from a few dogmas, claimed to be "self-evident," toward conclusions about what "must be the case," with never a reference to experience.[1]

As Niebuhr himself said, he accepted "the critical thought" of Ernst Troeltsch as basic for his own thought.[2] He was convinced that theology and ethics must work within the limits of historical relativism. But this raised a crucial question: Within these limits, what sort of certitude or verification or authority is possible? How do we discover the particular understanding of Christian faith that is authoritative for us? And once we have discovered it, how do we test it and verify its authority? Here, too, Niebuhr saw some important clues in Troeltsch's thought.

Troeltsch's Answer: Relativism without Agnosticism

Having accepted the consequences of relativism, Troeltsch proposed grounds for the authority of Christianity that do not violate the limits of relativism. He spoke of a basic norm which he called an apriori, but which is relative and hence "quite a different thing from Kantian apriority. It does not mean universal validity, nor timelessness nor imperativeness for all men."[1] Universal validity, then, is no longer the anchor that holds the norm fast in spite of the shifting sands of subjective whim. But there are other anchors.

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[1] Niebuhr, Review of The Cross and the Eternal Order, A Study of Atonement in Its Cosmic Significance, by Henry W. Clark, Religion in Life, XV (Spring, 1946), 315.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, p. x.

First, the understanding of Christianity that is authoritative for us must be firmly rooted in historical research. Its actual role in civilization must be completely open to historical criticism. The discovery of its content must be made by thorough and critical investigation of the history of Christianity and of Western civilization to determine what are and have been the norms actually central to these great historical realities. As Niebuhr described it, "Such relative apriorism does not mean subjectivism for Troeltsch. The apriori standard must be sought objectively, that is after as complete an emancipation as possible from inherited viewpoints and unconscious prejudices and with close attention and willing surrender to empirical facts."[2] This method for discovering the authoritative norm makes sense only if the norm is itself a historical reality. What kind of historical reality this norm is, and what kind of questions lead to its recognition in history, are central issues for such a method. Niebuhr explicitly accepted this part of Troeltsch's method.[3]

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[1] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 255.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Niebuhr, Meaning of Revelation, pp. 20-21: "Historic faith, directed toward a reality which appears in our history and which is apprehended by historic beings, is not private and subjective, without possibility of verification. To be in history is to be in society, though in a particular society. Every view of the universal from the finite standpoint of the individual in such a society is subject to the test of experience on the part of companions who look from the same standpoint in the same direction as well as to the test of consistency with the principles and concepts that have grown out of past experience in the same community."

Second, there is the pragmatic test. How well does the norm help interpret and organize the historical situation of our civilization and especially of the Christian churches? Niebuhr said this test is the basic method of verification within the limits of relativism as Troeltsch saw them: "Furthermore, the pragmatic test of the fruitfulness of the apriori standard in its ability to interpret historical reality also guards against subjectivism. This is all the objectivity we need, Troeltsch maintained, and more than that is nowhere available."[1] "The recognition of the apriori element may be guided by the fruitfulness of the element chosen in interpreting life and by the practical results of its application to active life."[2] Niebuhr adopted this test also for his own theology.[3] He used it to deliver himself from being simply at the mercy of the historical stream. He could test, reject, affirm, and improve his normative understandings by testing their ability to interpret historical reality. Almost all of Niebuhr's writings were engaged in just such a testing and correcting process.[4] History became the laboratory in which he tested the ideas of theology and ethics.[5] This is a basic component in his response to relativism, and we shall have to pay close attention to it.

Third, the norm is authoritative for us because it is inevitable for us. Because we are conditioned by our history, the norm that is central to our history is inevitably central to our life as a community with a shared understanding. Troeltsch put it clearly:

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[1] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 255.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.

[3] *Meaning of Revelation*, p. 21.

[4] For example, see chapters 5-7 below.

[5] Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York, 1937), p. x.

> Its [Christianity's] primary claim to validity is thus the fact that only through it have we become what we are, and that only in it can we preserve the religious forces that we need. Apart from it we lapse either into a self-destructive titanic attitude, or into effeminate trifling, or into crude brutality. . . . We cannot live without a religion, yet the only religion that we can endure is Christianity, for Christianity has grown up with us and has become a part of our very being.[1]

The authority of the norm is still absolute for us even if it is not absolute for all men, just because it expresses the moral obligation that is inseparable from our history, and therefore inseparable from our actual situation in life.

> Now it is evident that although the value of such goods may be absolute it is not universal, for these objective values appear in varying forms under different sociological and historical conditions. Troeltsch seeks to solve the difficulty created by this consideration by maintaining the apriority and absoluteness of the observer's system of values without claiming universality and eternity for it. The result is the doctrine that all our values are relative to our historical situation, yet they are absolutely obligating within that situation. Hence his philosophy of history has been compared to the theory of relativity and he has been called "an Einstein of the religious world."[2]

Niebuhr's confessional method accepted this suggestion of Troeltsch's, also. As early as 1929 he expanded and developed an explicit advocacy of "the obligation of the Christian to follow the Christian ethics" not because it is universally valid, but because he is a Christian, and because his experience of God's revelation is a part of the historical Christian experience that has been tested by trial and error throughout Christian history.[3] But The Meaning of

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[1] Troeltsch, Christian Thought, p. 25. Cf. Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 260-61.

[2] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 100-01.

[3] Niebuhr, Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic (New York, 1929), pp. 8-11.

Revelation puts it most clearly. It begins by strongly affirming the consequences of historical relativism: theology that wants to be understood must accept its historical point of view, must not think it can jump out of its history. If this is true, then theology must accept the basic elements of its historical situation, including the elements that are normative in its history. At least it must begin there. "Theology, then, must begin in Christian history and with Christian history because it has no other choice; in this sense it is forced to begin with revelation, meaning by that word simply historic faith."[1] "And it can pursue its inquiry only by recalling the story of Christian life and by analyzing what Christians see from their limited point of view in history and faith."[2] This is the beginning of Niebuhr's confessional method, which he spells out in The Meaning of Revelation.[3]

But Troeltsch saw more significance in Christianity's inevitability for us than the sheer fact of its inescapability; the reason that it plays such an essential role in western civilization is that Christianity is in fact a manifestation of God for us. It is not merely an inescapable part of our human history; it is the way we perceive the presence of God.

> Christianity could not be the religion of such a highly developed racial group if it did not possess a mighty spiritual power and truth; in short, if it were not, in some degree, a manifestation of the Divine Life itself. The evidence we have for this remains essentially the same, whatever may be our theory concerning

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1. Meaning of Revelation, pp. 21-22.

2. Ibid., p. 42.

3. Ibid., especially pp. 38-42, 43ff. and 91ff.

> absolute validity—it is the evidence of a profound inner experience. This experience is undoubtedly the criterion of its validity, but, be it noted, only of its validity for us. It is God's countenance as revealed to us; it is the way in which, being what we are, we receive, and react to, the revelation of God. It is binding upon us, and it brings us deliverance. It is final and unconditional for us, because we have nothing else, and because in what we have we can recognise the accents of the divine voice.[1]

Niebuhr made the same sort of point in a modified way. He argued repeatedly that in our relative situation we do experience and know God, who is universal, even if our experience is historically conditioned and our knowledge is not universal.[2] Niebuhr carefully worked out a way of describing the real manifestation of God Himself in the continuing historical experience of the community of faith. This is basic to his understanding of revelation, and it is important in his battle against subjectivism and for the sovereignty of God. We shall take it up in detail when we discuss that battle.

Niebuhr summarized Troeltsch's approach to the authority of Christianity by stating that it consists of three basic elements. "The one is the idea of the relativity of all historical values, and so of religion, the other is the apriori and imperative obligation which such values impose upon us, and the third is the presentiment, the intuition, the direct inner experience of the Divine life." Niebuhr conceded that the first element received the greatest emphasis in Christian Thought, but he argued that in Troeltsch's overall writings the emphasis "was really placed upon the second and third elements."[3]

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[1] Troeltsch, Christian Thought, p. 26. Cf. also pp. 106-07.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 18-20.

[3] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 262-63. In pointing this out, Niebuhr indicated his own interest in the realist side of Troeltsch as opposed to the purely relativist side.

Troeltsch had accepted the very historical relativism which had driven many to subjectivism and away from firm religious norms. He had shown how the norms that are central to our history are not only possible but inevitable for us. He had pointed out that if we are historically relative, then we can escape the norms that are central to our history no more successfully than we can escape any other essential part of our history.[1] The acceptance of relativism removed the sting from many arguments for pure subjectivism. And it did more--it gave a method for ascertaining, maintaining and validating ethical norms, a method firmly rooted in the twentieth century awareness. Because ours is a "self-consciously historical time," we must begin the way the Christian community has usually begun--by speaking "in confessional terms about the events that had happened to it in its history."[2] Niebuhr learned this from Troeltsch. Thus his study of Troeltsch in 1924 could conclude:

> Instead of regarding Troeltsch's philosophy of religious history therefore as the philosophy of relativism, it may be regarded as the philosophy of complete obligation. Christianity is not only the sufficient religion, it is the imperative religion; it is our Fate. We are bound to treasure and to develop and to supply it not only because we have been born Christians, but because the inner voice of duty compels us to recognize it as our highest value. Not the sufficiency of Christianity, but the inevitability of Christianity is the watchword of Troeltsch's philosophy of religious history.[3]

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[1] See above, p. 10f.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, p. 43.

[3] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 263.

Ernst Troeltsch and Religious Subjectivism

Relativism was not the only problem Niebuhr confronted while studying Troeltsch in the 1920's. He saw another problem--the problem of religious subjectivism. Religious subjectivism as he described it is the concentration on religion as an inner movement in the human psyche. When theology makes this sort of introspective religion its object, theology becomes a study of man's pious feelings or inner states. It becomes self-conscious self-stimulation.[1]

In his doctoral dissertation, Niebuhr indicated strong sympathy for Troeltsch's reaction against "Ritschlian subjectivism and agnosticism." Such reaction is "thoroughly natural, insofar as religious interest in the reality of the religious Object will always lead to rebellion against an agnostic theology."[2] But Troeltsch's reaction stopped short, Niebuhr thought. Troeltsch began the escape from subjectivism by stressing "the belief in an objective element as present in religious experience." But Troeltsch remained a subjectivist in this sense: he continued "to treat religion primarily as a movement immanent in the human spirit."[3]

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[1] Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," *Christian Century*, XLIV (January 13, 1927), 47-48.

[2] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 56 *et passim*.

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 59-60: "Since Troeltsch found the essence of religion to be the experience of revelation or of an intuition of God, the application of this theory of knowledge would appear to be a relatively simple matter. He does indeed stress the belief in an objective element as present in religious experience, but continues to treat religion primarily as a movement immanent in the human spirit and to apply the theory of knowledge to this movement or drive. . . . despite his efforts to evade the doctrines of psychological idealism he surrendered so much of experience to the subject that he could not make good his escape."

According to Niebuhr, Troeltsch approached religious knowledge "from the stand-point of dualism. . . . The old pre-Kantian theology is no longer possible; as scientific thought does not deal with transsubjective realities but only with the material immanent in consciousness so the science of religion cannot deal with God but with the religious consciousness only."[1] And this leads right back to the agnostic theology against which both Troeltsch and all "religious interest in the reality of the religious Object" rebel. If Niebuhr is right in contending that Troeltsch wanted to escape from such subjectivism, then we must ask why the escape failed.

The first reason is the one Niebuhr described above. It is the subjectivism of Troeltsch's idealist epistemology. This epistemology limits both science and theology to "material immanent in consciousness" and "does not deal with transsubjective realities."[2] This is the Kantian side of Troeltsch. It conflicts with his more realist emphasis on "direct inner experience of the Divine life."[3] To correct this Niebuhr would have to develop a more consistently realist epistemology, and that is what he did—as we shall see.

The second reason for Troeltsch's failure to escape from subjectivism is another aspect of his idealist epistemology. It is his assumption that true objectivity requires universality. He still sought something like a universal apriori in spite of the fact that historical relativism denied the possibility of finding a universal apriori. He still seemed at times to believe that whatever was grounded in transcendent reality would be universally perceived by all men, and that all else was merely subjective. This needs some explaining.

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[1] Ibid., p. 164.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp. 262-63. See also pp. 58, 74, 111-13, 163ff., 218, and 266-70 for Niebuhr's description of the conflict between these two sides of Troeltsch.

Troeltsch was concerned to define the religious apriori. The apriori is the objective and autonomous element in religion. It is authoritative and normative because it is objective and essential to religious man. Apriority refers to those principles or values that are the essential and fundamental certainties of religion, that give unity and coherence to religion, that are in touch with the transcendent reality that religion refers to, that are basic, independent, autonomous, and not derived from some other values. They are not merely the means to fulfilling some subjective desire but are the objective and essentially normative content of religion.[1]

According to Troeltsch's own description of the process of knowing, his attempt to define the apriori must be a relative attempt. It cannot be universal. It cannot satisfy all places and all times. Troeltsch knew that all knowledge is relative. Furthermore he described the choosing of the religious apriori as an act of adventure, an act of the will, and thus departed from Kant to become more like James. Niebuhr made this clear in his dissertation.[2] And Niebuhr suggested that the implication is obvious: "Since this is the manner in which knowledge of the apriori alone may be gained, it follows that apriority can not mean eternity, universal validity and absoluteness."

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1. Ibid., pp. 169-96.

2. Ibid., p. 171.

Nor can it mean timelessness and immutability.[1]

Yet, as Niebuhr pointed out, Troeltsch still clung to a desire for universality. There were two fundamentally different methods of knowing in Troeltsch's thought. One was more empirical, realist, historical, and somewhat Bergsonian or Jamesian. This was the method that could establish authoritative norms within the limits of historical relativism without falling into subjectivism. But there was also another method of knowing--more rationalistic, universalistic, idealist, and Kantian. Troeltsch did not reconcile the two, and this caused serious problems in his thought. To point out and criticize this unreconciled dualism in Troeltsch's thought was the main object of Niebuhr's dissertation.[2]

We can see the force of Niebuhr's criticism if we look at the conclusion of Troeltsch's Social Teaching of the Christian Churches. There Troeltsch was asking whether we can discover a Christian apriori, an objective element in Christianity that should be normative for contemporary Christians. But he was asking that whatever is normative for contemporary Christians prove its objectivity by being universally normative in the teaching of all churches of all times. He asked, "Can we not learn something from a large work of this kind to help us to overcome our miserable ecclesiastical situation, which is daily becoming worse?"[3] "Does [this study] not also teach something lasting and eternal about the Christian social Ethos, which might serve as a guiding star for the present and for the future, something which would aid us not merely to understand but also to transform the situation?"[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 172.

[2] Ibid., pp. 111-12, 163-64, 195-96, and 270.

[3] Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, p. 1006.

The answer was "yes," but the content of the "yes" was meager and sparse, and the voice was weak and quavering. Troeltsch stated his conclusions about the norms of Christian ethics in the space of one and one-half pages, and the norms amounted to four values and a goal: individual personality, divine love, mutuality, active helpfulness, and the idea of the future kingdom of God. The irony is that to our ears fifty years later, these "universal norms" sound so specifically like the categories of nineteenth-century liberalism. Furthermore, they are thin and meager; they lack the substance and richness of the more empirical part of The Social Teaching.

What this meagerness means for the problem of subjectivism is clear. Troeltsch was still looking for "the permanent ethical values which are contained within the varied history of the Christian social doctrines."[2] He was still expecting true Christian norms to be universally maintained by the various churches throughout the centuries of church history. What was not universal Troeltsch seemed to treat as solely subjective.[3] When the honest historian searched for norms that are universally accepted throughout the centuries, he had to admit that they are difficult to find. If the normative is measured by universal acceptance, then the conclusion was forced on him that very little is normative in the history of the Christian Church. The result, then, was that everything relative was handed over to the realm of the subjective. Very little remained "which might serve as a guiding star."

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[1] Ibid., p. 1004.

[2] Ibid.

[3] See also Social Teaching, p. 9; "The Dogmatics of the 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,'" pp. 14ff.; Christian Thought, pp. 67-68.

An example of the impact of this quest for the universal is Troeltsch's way of interpreting Jesus. Here too he assumed that revelation must be universal and that all else is merely the movement of particular human spirits. Therefore he missed much of the meaning of Jesus' teachings. He argued, for example, that Jesus was not timeless, eternal, and universal but rather a part of the Judaic-Oriental and apocalyptic-eschatological culture which was peculiar to his day.[1] This truth which now seems obvious to us meant for Troeltsch that one could not speak of the action of God or the presence of God or the incarnation of God in Christ.[2] God is timeless, eternal, not relative. Jesus is relative to a particular time. So Troeltsch's assumption led to the distortion of much of what is said by the historical witnesses to Jesus. The acts of God, the revelatory, the eschatological, were ignored. Troeltsch found in Christ instead an idealist whose inspiring teachings were oriented around a central religious idea, and who can be used by us to create the symbol of our cultus.[3]

Likewise with Luther. Troeltsch repeatedly subjectivized

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1. Troeltsch, Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben, pp. 3ff.

2. Ibid., p. 50 and pp. 3ff.

3. Troeltsch, Social Teaching, pp. 50-51; Die Bedeutung, pp. 25-27.

Luther's references to the invasion of history by God. The result was failure to touch the heart of Luther's theocentric faith. Where Luther spoke of the activity of God, Troeltsch interpreted him to be speaking of some aspect of human activity.[1] Where Luther spoke of God's gift of grace, Troeltsch translated it "a Divine temper of faith." And faith he defined not primarily as a relationship to the transcendent but as a human attitude or conviction.[2] Furthermore, Luther's invisible church was immanentized by Troeltsch into the purely spiritual influence of the visible church. Troeltsch seemed inadvertently to confess his own confusion about Luther's emphasis on the transcendence of the Church: "The 'Invisible Church' is not the right term for Luther's conception of the church, although he himself sometimes uses this confusing expression; what he really meant was that the church is visible in the Word and the Sacrament, but invisible and incalculable in her purely spiritual influence."[3]

Subjectivism in Troeltsch, then, is the inversion of language about God and his action into language about man and his goals. At least two aspects of Troeltsch's thought barricaded the way of escape from such subjectivism. One was the Kantian or Ritschlian agnosticism of his epistemology, which drove theology to concentrate on man's consciousness as the only accessible object of knowledge. The other was the assumption that a norm which is not purely subjective must distinguish itself by its universal acceptance. Both of these were aspects of what could be labelled the nonrealistic side of Troeltsch's thought, his Kantian rationalism.[1]

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[1] Troeltsch, Protestantism and Progress (Boston, 1958), p. 99 *et passim*.

[2] Troeltsch, Social Teaching, pp. 468-69.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 480-81.

These two problems, then, were major concerns for Niebuhr as he entered the period of the early thirties and developed his understanding of the sovereignty of God. Not only was Troeltsch present in Niebuhr's thought as a guide through the problems of historical relativism; he was also present with his subjectivism, as a challenge to be overcome. Niebuhr had to overcome the problems involved in the nonrealistic, subjective side of Troeltsch's thought while not transgressing Troeltsch's critical relativism. It is in the light of this task that his development of the theme of the sovereignty of God must be understood.

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[1] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 163. Cf. also pp. 74, 111-12, 164-96, and 270.

CHAPTER II

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

"The axe," Niebuhr wrote in 1934, "has been laid at the root of the tree of modern life."[1] The crisis is too serious for talk of ideals and crusades. Enthusiastic talk about the God of high ideals sounds like uninformed optimism about the improving health of a sick friend--incongruous talk for those who are sitting at his wake. Ideals have been overcome by reality, and reality is in crisis.

> We can no longer ask what we must do in order that we may achieve the ideal of a warless world. We must inquire far more desperately and seriously what must be done in order that we may be saved from the storm of war that is even now gathering upon the horizon. We can no longer ask what we must do in order that we may increase human brotherliness and kindness. Our question now is not the question of builders of the kingdom of God on earth but the question of Cain. The blood, the pain, the misery of our brothers cries up to heaven against us. What must we do to atone for this brutal common life of ours? What must we do to be saved from continued participation in the mass murders and mass thefts of modern life? What must we do as a nation to be saved from putrefaction, from the foulness of our physical and moral disease? . . . We belong today among the sick.[2]

What we must do, Niebuhr wrote, is to work for economic justice and for ethical responsibility in our vocations.[3] But more than this, we must do something about disillusionment and utter futility. Niebuhr was describing not only the crisis of modern civilization, but also his own disillusionment. His own idealism had been shattered by the force of historical events. He had experienced his own crisis of faith, his own Turmerlebnis.[1] In the midst of this crisis, he discovered the new—and old—foundation for faith that then became the permanent and central theme of his theology and ethics. This new foundation was the sovereignty of God.

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[1] Niebuhr, "What Then Must We Do?" Christian Century Pulpit, V (July, 1934), 145.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 145-46.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Years later, in 1960, when he was reviewing his life's work, Niebuhr identified "the years between 1930 and 1935 as the time in which I began to think the way I do now."[2] He wrote that "the fundamental certainty given to me then (sad to say, not in such a way that my unconscious as well as conscious mind has been wholly permeated by it) was that of God's sovereignty."[3] He explained that this meant a decisive "break with the so-called liberal or empirical theology" that "defined God primarily in value-terms." And then he repeated: "The old theological phrase, 'the sovereignty of God,' indicates what is for me fundamental."[4] Therefore it makes sense to examine Niebuhr's writings in the early 1930's in order to achieve a preliminary understanding of what he meant by the sovereignty of God, especially as it relates to his break with the value-theory method of liberal theology.

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[1] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (November 25, 1963), 215: "In any event, it will not do either to make Edwards the sole catalyst or to interpret Niebuhr as a mediator of Troeltsch and Barth, as is frequently done. What happened to Niebuhr was at once more general (a renewed appreciation for classic Christian theology) and more personal (In answering my queries on this subject he referred to his own Turmerlebnis of justification by faith—his terms)."

[2] Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII (March 2, 1960), 249.

[3] Ibid., p. 248.

[4] Ibid.

When Niebuhr wrote that the axe had been laid to the root of the tree of modern life, he was also describing his own inner struggle and the resolution that resulted. He was pointing to the sovereignty of God as the only lasting basis for faith. His description of this new foundation is brief, but it is uniquely revealing because he published it in 1934, at the culmination of his experience of crisis and new breakthrough.[1] It deserves quoting at length, without interruption:

> The threat against our life appears not only in the long-drawn out and ever recurrent crises which have come in the economic and political spheres; it is present also in the loss of life's meaning for individuals and for groups. There was a time when we drew significance for our existence out of the association with the great human institutions and movements. We were part of a progressing world. Democracy, science, technology, industry, church and education, called us into their service and in their signs we were to conquer. We enlisted in great crusades. But the institutions have lost their glamor as we have discovered the stuff out of which they were made and the crusades have ended as all the crusades in all the past have ended--with the crusaders in possession of a tomb. We are not ready to reject these institutions and enterprises but we do not believe in them as once we did and we cannot draw from them the sense of significant living that we once enjoyed. The gods we worshipped have shown themselves to be idols, dependent upon us for their existence. Though

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[1] The dawning of the breakthrough on the epistemological side can be seen as early as his criticism of subjectivism and Kantian agnosticism in his dissertation; and as we have seen, the epistemological breakthrough continues to develop in his subsequent writings in the late twenties and early thirties. On the ontological or fully theological side, the affirmation of God's sovereignty as universal rule over all things, in a sense approaching divine determinism, appears for the first time in his essay in 1932, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," Christian Century, XLIX (March 23, 1932), 378-380. We shall postpone discussion of that essay, and shall here take note of "What Then Shall We Do?" because it is more balanced and more of a personal confession of Niebuhr's own struggle.

> we continue to serve them, we worship them no longer. But having lost these gods our lives are threatened with emptiness. What must we do to be saved from utter futility?
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> . . . .
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> A crisis of faith is the deepest crisis there is and it can never be overcome by a will to believe in the very things which have failed us. Nor can it be overcome successfully by the creation of new idols. For a time the idolatry of the race or the nation or the class may be able to deliver men from their futility and give them courage and strength for their new tasks. But these gods are almost as transitory as the ones they have replaced and they are no less divisive and destructive in the long run. The events of our time insist that we shall not be able to find the basis of the faith by which we can live and must live save in the "I am that I am" on which we are utterly dependent for our being and our meaning. These events wring from us again the faith which no will to believe can establish, the faith in that last reality which is our creator and our slayer.
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> But more than that, the answer to our question "What shall we do to be saved?" directs us to Jesus Christ. It is not the love of traditional modes of thought nor the romantic flight to medieval ways of life which makes the answer "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" a real answer for us today. Our tragedy and our sin compel us to look again to that segment of history in which sin and tragedy and the God who brings our sin to its tragic and redeeming consequences came to fullest appearance. To believe in the Lord Jesus Christ means many things, but it means this at least, that our faith is established upon no wish nor dream but upon a very bitter reality. It does not mean to believe in a kindly spirit somewhere who may help us in our more or less pious endeavors, but it does mean that we have seen the enemy and the judge of our sin as our redeemer.[1]

This is Niebuhr's confession of his discovery of the sovereignty of God. It is his description of the breakthrough that shaped all his thought. It is his discovery of the rock on which he established his theology and ethics.

Three affirmations seem basic to Niebuhr's advocacy of the sovereignty of God. All three recur in his writings in the early 1930's. The first is the reality of God's rule over all things in the world, including the bitter and the tragic; the second is the independence of God from subjective values and religious ideals; and the third is the knowable manifestation of God within relative history.

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[1] "What Then Must We Do?" pp. 146-47.

The Universality of the "I Am That I Am."

The first affirmation, that God is the actual ruler over all things in the world, is the *sine qua non* of Niebuhr's response to the crisis of faith. Nothing less can stand its ground. Pious endeavors and belief in ideals fall before the onslaught of the actuality of events. If God is to be God, He must be more than an inspiration to piety and idealism. He must be the ruler of events, the Lord of the "is," not merely of the "ought." This is what Niebuhr means when he writes of the "'I am that I am' on which we are utterly dependent for our being and our meaning," and of "that last reality which is our creator and our slayer." The basic definition of God is that He is the power that rules this world in its actuality, in its createdness and also in its wars, crucifixions, and deaths. Even if it means including some bitter realities, we must learn to begin with the whole world in its concrete givenness here and now as the sphere of God's lordship.

Niebuhr was rebelling against the liberal understanding of God as a finite ameliorative force working through men who stand for high ideals. "In its one-sided view of progress which saw the growth of the wheat but not that of the tares, the gathering of the grain but

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not the burning of the chaff, this liberalism was indeed naïvely optimistic."[1] In criticizing the moral idealism of American liberalism, "he penned his most quoted statement--a judgment on the later Social Gospel that also had important autobiographical dimensions: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.'"[2]

Niebuhr was calling for a recovery of the belief of the main Protestant forefathers in "the living reality of God's present rule, not only in human spirits but also in the world of nature and of human history."[3] In the faith of the main stream of prophetic Protestantism, God's kingdom "was not an ideal dependent for its realization on human effort; men and their efforts were dependent upon it; loyalty to it and obedience to its laws were the conditions of their temporal and eternal welfare."[4] Niebuhr was here recovering his own roots in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition and his own affinity to what he called the God-centered theology and God-centered ethics of the prophetic Christian tradition.[5] He was fond of listing the key figures in this theocentric tradition as Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards.[6]

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[1] The Kingdom of God in America, p. 193.

[2] Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," p. 215, quoting Kingdom of God in America, p. 193.

[3] Kingdom of God in America, p. 51.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," The Heritage of the Reformation, edited by Elmer J. F. Arndt (New York, 1950), pp. 218ff.

[6] Ibid., and Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," Faith and Ethics, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York, 1965), pp. 10-11.

At stake for Niebuhr in the early thirties was not simply the rejoining of the classic tradition or the acknowledging of a doctrine. For Niebuhr the issue was the affirmation of a reality, of the fundamental reality of life. Niebuhr was making a passionate and prophetic attack on a sickness that had engulfed church and world alike. That sickness was idolatry. Church and world had substituted man's subjective desires for God, and they had absolutized the relative to the point of demonic destructiveness. In 1935 Niebuhr wrote of this idolatry:

> In contemporary civilization it appears as a humanism which regards man as existing for his own sake and which makes him the object of his own worship. It appears also as a nationalism in which man is taught to live and die for his own race or country as the ultimate worthful reality, and which requires the promotion of national power and glory at the expense of other nations as well as of the individuals with their own direct relation to the eternal. It has exhibited itself in the guise of a capitalism for which wealth is the great creative and redemptive power, and as an industrialism which worships the tawdry products of human hands as the sources of life's meaning. Humanity, nation, wealth, industry—these are all but finite entities, neither good nor bad in themselves; in their rightful place they become ministers to the best; regarded and treated as self-sufficient and self-justifying they become destructive to self and others.[1]

Niebuhr had seen the same sickness that Karl Barth and others had seen,[2] and the message of the sovereignty of God was not simply a

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For other references to Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards as the main representatives of the tradition with which Niebuhr finds his greatest affinity, see: Niebuhr, Review of Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology, vol. I, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, VII (November, 1951), 47; Niebuhr, "Critic's Corner," Theology Today, XVII (July, 1961), 360; and Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249. Calvin and Edwards are the two representatives he always includes.

[1] Niebuhr, The Church Against the World (Chicago and New York, 1935), pp. 126-27.

[2] See chap. vi below for a more extensive indication of Barth's influence on Niebuhr's breakthrough in the early 1930's. The Theology of Crisis and the German Church Struggle were decisive influ-

plausible option but the absolutely necessary imperative if any health was to be restored.

The only way to be freed from destructive idolatries such as nationalism is to substitute a non-idolatrous faith. "A movement toward emancipation cannot become effective so long as it is only a rejection of false loyalties and entanglements. Loyalties can be recognized to be false only when a true loyalty has been discovered."[1] And this was the fundamental certainty that burst upon Niebuhr in the midst of the darkness, the certainty to which he committed his life of theological work. Not some relative human projection but the living God is the source of all life. Niebuhr's declaration of dependence on God and emancipation from captivity has a prophetic ring which must be heard, not described:

> The church's declaration of independence can begin only with the self-evident truth that it and all life are dependent upon God, that loyalty to him is the condition of life and that to him belong the kingdom and the power and the glory. Otherwise the emancipation of the church from the world is impossible; there is no motive for it nor any meaning in it. There is no flight out of the captivity of the church save into the captivity of God. Such words must seem to many to be pious and meaningless platitudes, mere gestures of respect to the past and bare of that realism which the present moment demands. That this is so is but another illustration of the extent to which the faith of the church has been confounded with the belief in the ideas, wishes and sentiments of men, and to which the word God has been made the symbol, not of the last reality with which man contends, but of his own aspirations. . . . Through the destruction of our idols and the relentless pursuit of our self-confidence God is driving us, in the church and in the world, to the last stand where we must recognize our dependence upon him or, in vainglorious rebellion, suffer demoralization and dissolution. The crisis of modern mankind is like the crisis of the prophets, the crisis of the Roman Empire in the days of Augustine, and that of the medieval world

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ences here. But our present task is simply a preliminary delineation, and we must postpone that part of the story.

[1] Church Against the World, p. 149.

> in the days of the Reformation. The last appeal beyond all finite principalities and powers must soon be made. It cannot be an appeal to the rights of men, of nations or religions but only an appeal to the right of God.[1]

Throughout his writings, Niebuhr reminds his reader of "the radical action whereby we are ourselves in the here and now, as thus and so, . . . the radical action that flings [the self] into existence and holds it there."[2] He begins not with what is good, nor with man's subjective feeling toward himself, but with "the alien and inscrutable power that elects us and all things into existence."[3] He reminds the reader that this power is our real God, our real maker and ruler, whether we seek to flee from this power by ignoring it or whether we distrust it as enemy or trust it as friend.[4] The question is not the existence of this inscrutable power. We all recognize it. Sometimes we attribute our existence to many different causes and become practical polytheists; sometimes we attribute it to self or nation and become egoists or nationalists; but each of us is aware of this "radical action by which I am."[5] The power that calls us and all things into existence is our actual God, whatever we call it. The question is not its existence, but its identity, its character, its enmity, hostility, or trustworthiness. We all face this power. The question is whether we trust it or not.[1]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 149-51.

[2] Responsible Self, p. 115. Niebuhr writes in similar fashion in the following: "Value-Theory and Theology," The Nature of Religious Experience, edited by J. S. Bixler, et al. (New York, 1937), pp. 113-16; "Life Is Worth Living," Intercollegian and Far Horizons, LVII (October, 1939), pp. 3-4, 22; Meaning of Revelation, pp. 77-80 and 175ff.; Christ and Culture, pp. 250-55; Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York, 1960), pp. 16-23 and 100-26.

[3] Responsible Self, p. 119.

[4] Ibid., pp. 115, 117, and 119.

[5] Ibid., pp. 109ff.

But it was not enough simply to assert the reality of God's rule over all men and nations and nature. Niebuhr had to concentrate on the epistemological question because he considered it the major reason why theology had departed from the prophetic and theocentric tradition. It was in struggling with the question, How do we know God?, that he developed the second affirmation involved in his advocacy of the sovereignty of God.

The Independence of God from Subjective Values

The second affirmation could be called simply the transcendence of God. But the transcendence of God can mean many things, and Niebuhr had one meaning particularly in mind. That one meaning, the independence of God from subjective values and religious ideals, is repeatedly emphasized in his writings in the early 1930's.

The problem that made this second contention so necessary was the tendency of liberal theology to derive its definition of God from subjective values. God became secondary and man's desires became primary. God seemed to be a useful means to human ends. In rebelling against this value-theory method of liberal or empirical theology, Niebuhr was not rejecting all relation between God and value considerations, but protesting against making God a derivative of value analysis. He was rebelling against subjectivism.

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[1] *Ibid.*, chaps. iv and v.

As early as 1927 Niebuhr published a strong attack on nineteenth-century theological method. He contended that theology since Kant had become guilty of idolatry. Theology had made the knowledge of God so dependent on the values and consciousness of the human subject that subjective values had become the real God. And this in turn was largely responsible for the sterility and impotence of religion, and therefore of theology and ethics as well.[1]

Niebuhr called for a critical realism to replace this subjectivism. In an article published in 1931, he described the movement toward realism not only in theology but in the whole culture.[2] In religion and theology this movement "became definitely realistic in character and found its essence when it turned from experience to the content of experience, from emphasis upon the religious subject to attention to the religious object, from religion to God."[3] Niebuhr suggested that the trend toward realism has been powerful enough that it could be called a revolution, and the revolution includes several different theologies. "But all of these movements of religious realism are united by a common interest in maintaining the independent reality of the religious object. Hence they represent a movement distinctly different from nineteenth-century liberal theology which found its center of gravity in the idea of the ethical value of religion."[1] Theology needs a new center of growth, and that center must be God. Theology must turn to God the sovereign Creator who is far greater and more overwhelmingly real than a mere postulate dependent on some human value.

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[1] Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," pp. 47-48: "The net result of psychologizing about religion has been the apparent subjectivization of religion. Psychology has substituted religious experience for revelation, auto-suggestion for communion with God in prayer and mysticism, sublimation of the instincts for devotion, reflexes for the soul, and group consciousness or the ideal wish-fulfillment for God. . . . It is true that certain refinements in the use of appurtenances of worship and in the methods of arousing religious emotions may be traced to the study of psychology, but the refinement of method does not compensate for the great diminution of the sense of the reality of the Object of worship, which is also due to psychology. Many modern discussions of prayer and of the conduct of worship are tragic confessions of that loss. They appear as sterile and pitiful efforts to hold fast to a fiction which must be maintained as long as possible ere sad disillusionment robs the race of the values it affords—hectic efforts to develop a method of suggestion and auto-suggestion to take the place of communion." See also _The Kingdom of God in America_, pp. 79 and 195; _Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 27-33; _Christ and Culture_, pp. 15-17; _Radical Monotheism and Western Culture_, pp. 24-37.

[2] Niebuhr, "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," pp. 413-428.

[3] _Ibid._, p. 418.

God is independent not only from subjective values in general, but also from theological doctrines and religious sentiments in particular. Niebuhr suggested that the authors of one book had "written far too little about the grace of God and far too much about the doctrine of grace."[2] And the church, he said, had compromised with anthropocentrism while appearing to remain true to itself.

> That compromise was the substitution of religion for the God of faith. Man's aspiration after God, his prayer, his worship was exalted in this syncretism into a saving power, worthy of a place alongside science and art. Religion was endowed with all the attributes of Godhead, the while its basis was found in human nature itself.[3]

Niebuhr proclaimed the independence of God from religion and the church. He pronounced judgment on Christendom in the name of God who "can and will raise up another people to carry out the mission entrusted to it if the Christian community fail him."[1] The independent God "who appears in this judgment of the world is . . . the eternal God, Creator, Judge, and Redeemer, whom prophets and apostles heard, and saw at work, casting down and raising up. He uses all things temporal as his instruments, but resigns his sovereignty to none."[2]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 419.

[2] Niebuhr, Review of *The Doctrine of Grace*, edited by W. T. Whitley, *Crozier Quarterly*, IX (October, 1932), 475-76.

[3] *Church Against the World*, pp. 137-38.

In "Value-Theory and Theology," Niebuhr argued strongly for the independence of God from human values.[3] He pointed out that the movement to put values in the central position for theology had begun with Kant and had continued ever since.[4] Theologians after Kant disagreed whether values "are equivalent to God, or require the postulate of God, or offer the criteria by which the experience of God is to be distinguished from other experience," but they agreed in assuming that human values are the fundamental realities that tell us what or who God is.[5] Schleiermacher and Ritschl made the object of theology "not God, but man's relation to God, and divine activity was explained, not as a function of the Godhead, but as a function of man's dependence on the Godhead for the purpose of maintaining his values as a person."[6]

Niebuhr published this in a volume dedicated to D. C. Macintosh. Previously he had recommended Macintosh's empiricism as the cure for theology's ills.[1] Liberalism was still in its heyday, and Niebuhr had been one of its loyal representatives.[2] But now he was doing a turn-about. One can imagine there was some consternation at Yale.[3] Niebuhr wrote that even Macintosh, Wieman, and American empiricism "make values the criteria by means of which the experience of divine reality is distinguished from other experience." Therefore in their thought "value takes precedence over being, despite the realistic interest."[4] And the result, just as in Schleiermacher and Ritschl, becomes a tendency in some theologians toward religious Narcissism and utilitarianism. The focus shifts from God to religion and morality, and religion becomes a means to the end of maintaining and promoting human values.[5]

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[1] _Ibid_., p. 9. Cf. Cox, _The Secular City_, p. 265, and Cox, _God's Revolution_, pp. 105-07.

[2] _Church Against the World_, p. 12.

[3] "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 93-114.

[4] _Ibid_., p. 93.

[5] _Ibid_., p. 95.

[6] _Ibid_., p. 98. See also pp. 112-13.

Niebuhr was here accusing value-theory in theology of the same subjectivism he had criticized in Troeltsch. Here just as there he urged that this subjective procedure be overturned. He called for theology to be scientific in the sense of being interested in its object, God, for his "own sake and not for the sake of any end external to" God. A scientific theological method would demand "that God be loved for his own sake rather than for the sake of any value, high or low, material or spiritual, which he is conceived to conserve, promote, or increase."[1]

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[1] "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," p. 48.

[2] E.g., Niebuhr, Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York, 1957), pp. 264-84. This was originally published in 1929.

[3] Prof. Waldo Beach, in private conversation with the writer, has related that Macintosh, always tolerant and open-minded, was not sure what to make of these new developments.

[4] "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 95 and 96.

[5] Ibid., p. 103.

The alternative to the independence of God from human values is the absolutizing and universalizing of these values. To use our values as the criteria for the knowledge of God is to assume our values are God-like. And "the point at issue is whether man has knowledge of a system of values of absolute validity which he may make the basis of his religious judgments or employ as a criterion in the analysis of religious experience."[2] We recall how Troeltsch, for all his acceptance of the truth there is in historical relativism, still seemed to be searching for values that are held universally and eternally in the church; and we recall how such a search failed to overcome subjectivism.[3] It is the apriori value-theory which dooms such a search to failure, Niebuhr maintained. And Niebuhr attacked the value-theory method by contending it is not only religiously unsatisfactory, but scientifically impossible.

> To begin with universally valid and absolute values, discovered apart from religious faith, and to make these in any way decisive for faith is to seek the essence of the religious in the common criterion of all religions, and to make devotion to these values more fundamental than the worship of the individual beings with which the historic faiths are concerned.[4]

Failure in such an essentialist or universalist attempt can then lead to a dangerous subjectivist reaction. Niebuhr put the charge so pointedly that no one could confuse his position with subjectivism:

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[1] Ibid., p. 102.

[2] Ibid., p. 101.

[3] See above, pp. 26ff.

[4] "Value-Theory and Theology," p. 104.

> There is, however, another and more serious way of refusing to take the principle of relativity seriously in the field of value thinking. It consists of the exaltation of values recognized as relative to human structure into the final values or reality, in the assumption of the human standpoint as the last standpoint which man needs to recognize, or, at least, as the standpoint whence the values of the universe become visible as an integrated system. . . . This assumption seems to us to be unwarranted in view not only of the relativity but also of the conflict and tragedy of values.[1]

Niebuhr still wanted values to be involved in revelation.[2] But the values involved are not so much prior human values that are applied to God; they are new values that God applies to man. "The valuation of which man becomes aware in religious experience is not first of all his evaluation of a being, but that being's evaluation of him."[3] This revelational evaluation can surprise and counter what man had thought. It is independent of man's prior good opinions of his own satisfied self. The evaluation "does not need to be positive; on the contrary, in his experience of deity man frequently becomes aware of his disvalue, but he does not become aware of his unvalue."[4]

Hence the sovereignty of God means God's independence from human values not in the sense that he is unrelated to human values but in the sense that in his self-revelation he judges human values, counters some values, and establishes a new relationship in which he is the valuer before he is the valued. The life of faith is then founded on him more than he on it.[5] The initiative is God's, not

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1. Ibid., pp. 106, 109.

2. Ibid., pp. 110-11.

3. Ibid., p. 115.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.: "Religious experience includes an evaluation on the part of man, but primarily it expresses itself in the judgment, 'This

man's. But this already brings us to the third affirmation in Niebuhr's advocacy of the sovereignty of God, the revelation of God in history.

The Revelation of God within Relative History

Niebuhr saw that the third affirmation required by the sovereignty of God must be that God does reveal himself with noetic content in relative history. God himself must be and is revealed so that relative and historical man can know him. Otherwise theology has only subjective values to work with, and meaningful affirmation of the independence of God is undercut.

We have already seen that one of the assumptions barricading Troeltsch's escape from subjectivism was his idealist epistemology, an epistemology which held that "the science of religion cannot deal with God but with the religious consciousness only."[1] This assumption is what Niebuhr repeatedly called Kantian agnosticism. According to Kant, the Supreme Being is supersensible, and man has no way to distinguish the presence of this Supersensible Being from the presence of any other feeling.[2] Therefore man must infer his understanding of

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is the being which values me or judges me, by relation to which I have worth or possibility of worth,' while reflexively it issues in the judgment, 'This is the being of supreme intrinsic value, which corresponds to all my deepest needs.'" This is the beginning of Niebuhr's transformationism, which we shall discuss more fully later.

[1] Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," p. 164. See above, p. 26.

[2] Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone (Chicago, 1934), p. 163.

God from something else that he does know. For Kant this something else was moral values; for others it could be immediate feeling, church dogma, or existential self-understanding. But here a problem arose. If God is not known but only inferred from something else which is known, then that something else soon dominates the center of the stage and becomes a pretender to the throne of deity. The consequence was "a 'faithology' or a 'religionology' which turned attention away from God to religious feelings and tended to make the religious consciousness the object of confidence."[1]

Therefore Niebuhr had to attack Kantian agnosticism. He saw that he had to affirm an experience of God with some content relatively independent of the values held before the experience. In his essay on "Value-Theory and Theology," Niebuhr was writing in honor of D. C. Macintosh, and therefore he used some of the terminology of Macintosh's empirical theology; but one can already detect the foreshadowing of a central theme of The Meaning of Revelation:

> Such a value-experience is primitive and original. It deals with that absolute source of all value by relation to which all other things have their value. To analyze this experience by reference to values known and regarded as absolute prior to the experience is to lose sight of this fundamental character and so to falsify it to an extent. That the experience of the supremely worthful being by reference to which all other things have their value should lead to ethical results by increasing man's devotion to his best interests is true. But what the best interests are cannot be decided prior to the experience of that which is the source of all value.[2]

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1. The Meaning of Revelation, p. 28. Cf. pp. 23-37. Niebuhr's analysis in the early 1930's of the dilemma Kant had bequeathed to theology and of its influence on subjectivism in theology parallels Barth's analysis in Karl Barth, Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl (New York, 1959), especially chap. iv.

2. "Value-Theory and Theology," p. 115. Niebuhr was specifically affirming the Barthian beginning point: God's revelation as God's act of valuing man. He praised the theology of crisis for making

Niebuhr's attack on the Kantian beginning point led him into his revelational method. The attack began under the label of critical realism or objective relativism,[1] and it continued under other labels to repeat the basic contention: God reveals himself in faithful action in relative history so that men can know him; he is not simply an inference from human values. But this basic contention of Niebuhr's has often been missed by even some of his best interpreters. Probably because Niebuhr has sought to retain a modified version of some of Kant's critical concepts, many analyses of his theological method have assumed he was a Kantian agnostic in epistemology.[2] This assumption would be valid if Niebuhr's relativism were a denial of the knowable revelation of God in the midst of the relative situation. But that is precisely what Niebuhr does not mean by relativism.[3] If Niebuhr

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revelation its starting point, for asserting "the absolute priority of God," and for rejecting "the assumption that prior to . . . God's revelation of himself . . . the mind is in possession of a valid standard by means of which it can judge God and his revelation." (p. 111) At the same time, Niebuhr rejected Barthian exclusivism. Such exclusivism refuses to relate revelation to the value cognitions of men, to the relativities of history, to human religion. (Ibid.) Niebuhr said values and religion are relative and not universal, but he did not exclude them from Christian theology.

[1] "Objective relativism" is his term in "Value-Theory and Theology," p. 113, and Meaning of Revelation, p. 22. The labels are not so important. Niebuhr was partly anti-Kantian and partly neo-Kantian, realistic and critical. What does matter is this basic contention.

[2] Kenneth Cauthen, "An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Canadian Journal of Theology, X (January, 1964), 11, and John Cobb, Living Options in Protestant Theology: A Survey of Methods (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 284ff., are two recent examples. The distortions caused by such an interpretation should begin to be defined as we proceed, especially in chaps. iii and iv below.

[3] Meaning of Revelation, p. 20. Paul Ramsey, "The Transformation of Ethics," in Faith and Ethics, pp. 140-51, 155-56, and 164-65, sees the basic issue clearly even if his essentialism, in contrast to Niebuhr's existentialism, leads him to associate relativism with sub-

meant that, he would be removing a major section from the pillar of the sovereignty of God which holds up his theological ethics. Therefore we must show first that Niebuhr's realism was important to his proposals in the early thirties, and then that a similar realism continued to maintain itself in the particular kind of existentialism that Niebuhr developed as his thought matured.

As early as 1927, Niebuhr had said the problem in theology is that "Berkeley, Hume and Kant succeeded in transferring the point of view . . . so that henceforth the subject displaced the object in the center of attention, and psychology with epistemology were called upon to lead the way into every philosophical discussion."[1] This transfer of attention from object to subject "was introduced into theology by Schleiermacher, who defined religious doctrine in terms of social consciousness and of individual experience."[2] This theological method is the cause of sterile subjectivism in religion.[3] "God, prayer and revelation are left out of account as realities though their reality is not denied."[4] Niebuhr evaluated this subjective method by its historical results and found it to be destruc-

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jectivism (pp. 162-63). Ramsey suggests that Niebuhr call his position historical relationism rather than historical relativism for the same reasons we are here arguing. Ramsey's suggestion has the distinction of being the only one in _Faith and Ethics_ that Niebuhr explicitly commended and accepted in print ("Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249; cf. _Radical Monotheism_, p. 10).

[1] "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," p. 47.

[2] _Ibid_.

[3] _Ibid_. Cf. also Niebuhr's early article, "Jesus Christ Intercessor," _International Journal of Religious Education_, III (January, 1927), 7-8.

[4] "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," p. 48.

tive. He found it largely to blame for the hollowness of religious belief and practice and for the formlessness and lack of precision of theology and ethics.

Niebuhr's alternative proposal in the 1927 article was put very briefly: "If theology would resolutely turn its back on all psychologism, if it would devote itself with the wholeheartedness which characterizes the natural sciences to the observation and intense study of its object as it is revealed in history and in the ethical and spiritual life, then it might eventually be found worthy of the name science."[1] Theology's way of reform from subjectivism to the sovereignty of God required intense study of God's self-revelation in history and in the ethical and spiritual life. In contending for such a reform of theology, Niebuhr was rejecting the Kantian denial of the knowability of God in history and experience. He was advocating not a Kantian epistemology but a critical realism. Not merely a categorical imperative, but God himself, the object of theology, is "revealed in history and in the ethical and spiritual life."[2]

The same advocacy of realism in theology appears in Niebuhr's 1930 article on the failure of communication between German and American Christianity: "The way out of the impasse appears to lie only in a realism which will apprehend in all their stubborn actuality the facts of history and the fact of God."[3] Niebuhr's advocacy of realism is equally clear in a major essay the following year.[4] There he praises the theology of crisis in so far as it advocates the independence of God from apriori values and in so far as it affirms the revelation of God in history, and he criticizes crisis theology where it does not go far enough in carrying out these two themes. Concerning the independence of God, "the essential realism of the theology of crisis is expressed in its effort to distinguish the reality of God from all ideas about him, from all experience of him, from all natural theology, and to define revelation in wholly non-psychological terms."[1] But concerning the realistic overcoming of Kantian agnosticism, Barth and those of like persuasion fall short: "After reducing all experience and reason in the religious realm to purely subjective processes the Barthian movement succeeds only in arriving at a Kantian agnosticism in which God remains forever unknown."[2] Niebuhr is here saying that the only workable way for a theology to be able to affirm the sovereignty of God is for it to recognize that God himself is revealed in human history and experience. Barth, he suggests, is moving in that direction but his error is his exclusivism. Barth's realism properly breaks through Kantian agnosticism in that miraculous realm called special revelation in Jesus Christ; but it excludes all human history and experience from that realm. Therefore Barth leaves religion, history, and experience under the sovereignty of Kant. Niebuhr states his position unmistakably in his 1931 summary of Barth's method:

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Niebuhr, "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?" Christian Century, XLVII (July 23, 1930), 915.

[4] "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," pp. 413-28.

> The wholly transcendent God can enter into human life only by means of a revelation which stands in contrast to all religious experience, to all history as well, and which can, in the last analysis, be accepted only as pure dogma. In effect, therefore,

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[1] Ibid., p. 420.

[2] Ibid., p. 421.

> the theology of crisis is not so much a realism as a complete dualism which tends to become a dogmatism. Yet its realistic interest and its critical method remain as its significant meanings and the source of its religious strength.[1]

What must be noticed in this statement is that Niebuhr is not here a Kantian or a critical idealist criticizing Barth's realism. Rather he is here a realist criticizing the remnants of Kantian agnosticism that are still left in Barth. What is wrong is Barth's "Kantian agnosticism in which God remains forever unknown. To rescue itself from this position it must fall back, as it is doing to an increasing extent, upon authoritarian dogmatism."[2] It is Barth's exclusivism, his Kantian agnosticism concerning the revelation of God anywhere in history or human experience except in the special revelatory history of Jesus Christ, that causes his dogmatism.

Niebuhr praised and blamed Tillich from the same perspective.[3] Tillich caught Niebuhr's fancy in so far as his method seemed to "strain hard at the limits imposed upon it by the Kantian tradition and to incline its theory of knowledge more and more toward a realism comparable with that of the Anglo-Saxon countries."[4] The fact that Tillich may not have burst the Kantian bonds and may have appeared in his later writings to be less of a realist was not a merit but a liability.[5]

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1. Ibid. Cf. chap. ix below, pp. 283-95.

2. "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," p. 421.

3. Ibid., pp. 421-24.

4. Ibid., p. 422.

5. Ibid., p. 428; Niebuhr, Review of The Protestant Era, Religion in Life, XVIII (Spring, 1949), 292; Review of Systematic Theology, Volume I, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, VII (November, 1951), 49.

Niebuhr made his own position absolutely clear in the conclusion to his important article on religious realism. He said he was advocating critical realism. Such realism would be critical toward all attempts to absolutize some relative value or part of experience and to make that relative value into the determinative criterion of God's revelation. And it would be realistic in the sense that it would affirm the revealed presence of God in relative history and experience.[1]

Again in his 1937 article on value-theory, Niebuhr made it clear that the affirmation of the independence of God is not to be guarded by trying to define "his Deity without reference to his relation to his creatures."[2] There is a relationship between God and creature, and that relationship must be described in valuational terms. But the primary establishment of that relation is God's act of grace. He reveals his way of relating to them, he reveals his way of setting their value, and he is the center of value which makes them worthwhile, rather than vice versa.[1]

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[1] "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century," p. 428: "It is easy for the American to point out that German theology has pressed its critical principle to the point where it must choose between agnosticism and dogmatism and has, in fact, made a dogma out of the critical principle itself. On the other hand there is justice in the German criticism of the optimism and anthropocratic tendency in American religious thought. The acceptance of a more radical critical method than American religious realism has employed hitherto as in most instances would not need to involve it in an agnostic dualism. The independence of God from experience does not imply his remoteness from experience; the relativity of historical experience does not imply the absence of an absolute content or point of reference; the presence of evil in more subtle and pervasive forms than is usually granted by American realism does not imply the absence of the good. If American religious realism is called upon to become more critically aware of the subjective and the relative, it is also challenged to be critical of the critical dogma, to be as critical of every attempt to reduce the absolute to the relative as of every effort to exalt the relative into an absolute."

[2] "Value-Theory and Theology," p. 113.

In these essays, Niebuhr was fighting for a theological method that would overcome the subjectivism of the value-theory method by recognizing the knowable revelation of God, himself, not simply of some values, in history. For God to be sovereign in theological method he must be known as reality, not merely inferred from human values. This was clear in his thought in the early thirties as well as sixties.[2] While the mature statement of this affirmation did not come until the existentialism of The Meaning of Revelation, it was a major factor in his rediscovery of the sovereignty of God in the 1930's.

We may now return to Niebuhr's essay in 1934 with which this chapter began.[3] In that essay, after declaring that modern life is in crisis, that the progress of human values no longer provides an answer to our crisis of faith, and that our only hope is in the "I am that I am," Niebuhr wrote: "But more than that, the answer to our question . . . directs us to Jesus Christ." Niebuhr pointed to Jesus Christ not as a teacher of moral values and an example of religious ideals, nor as the proclaimer of the church's faith and man's self-understanding. Rather, he pointed to Jesus Christ as the disclosure of the "I am that I am" himself within relative history. Jesus Christ is "that segment of history in which sin and tragedy and the God who brings sin to its tragic and redeeming consequences came to fullest appearance." The Jesus Christ that Niebuhr pointed to is no wish nor dream but "a very bitter reality" in which "we have seen the enemy and the judge of our sin as our redeemer." The sovereign God himself is disclosed in knowable fashion within relative history—in fullest clarity in Jesus Christ.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 115-16.

[2] Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 14, continues this theme.

[3] "What Then Must We Do?" p. 147.

This is the point at which Troeltsch's historical relativism becomes all important. For if all that man can know is what becomes a part of his particular relative historical situation, then God must take part in that situation if he is to be known. If subjectivism is to be overcome, if God is really to be revealed to man, then God must be revealed in a way that man can know. But historically conditioned man can not distinguish what is timeless and universal from what is not. Therefore there must be some mark of the deity of God other than timelessness and universality by which man can distinguish him from all the false idols. This means that if Niebuhr is to affirm the sovereignty of God within the limits of Troeltsch's historical relativism, he must depart from Troeltsch's idealist understanding of the absolute timelessness of God. God must be revealed in particular, relative, historical ways, and man must be able to know him in particular, relative, historical ways. God must be historically revealed if man is to know him as sovereign. Otherwise God is unknown, and man must end with nothing but subjective human values.

Thus Niebuhr's affirmation of Troeltsch's historical relativism in conjunction with his affirmation of the sovereignty of God led him inexorably to write The Meaning of Revelation. It demanded that the meaning of the sovereignty of God must include his self-revelation in relative history so that relative man can know him. It demanded that

Niebuhr work out with care the meaning of the revelation of God within the limits of relative history so that man can know God's independence from human values, can let his idols die, and can begin to serve the living God.

Niebuhr's relation to Troeltsch involved more than the few issues that we have outlined so far. But it did involve at least these issues. And these issues were significant factors in Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God as he developed it in the early 1930's. The central feature of Troeltsch's influence was the full acceptance of the historical character of all human experience, faith, knowledge. As Niebuhr put it in his 1960 review of his life's thought,

> Whenever I write about the nature of faith I am made aware that I brought over into my reorientation of the '30's a kind of methodological conviction . . . of the radically historical character of human existence. I am certain that I can only see, understand, think, believe, as a self that is in time. . . . I do not see that faith comes to me or to my fellowmen through doctrines about what lies back of the historical event. It comes to me in history, not in doctrines about history.[1]

Niebuhr's full acceptance of the radically historical character of human existence, under the tutelage of Ernst Troeltsch, means that the particular situation in history is an essential part of all knowledge or faith. It means the rejection of all and any claims to special authority dependent on miracles that happen only in one's own religion. It means the rejection of claims to possession of universal truth, and the rejection of claims to knowledge of eternal verities that are not manifest in particular history. It means the adoption of a confessional method that seeks to discover and describe those norms that meet

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[1] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

Troeltsch's criteria. Such norms appear in our history, offer fruitful interpretation of the historical situation both here and now and elsewhere in other times, and are presently a part of our experience of the manifestation of God in our history.

Within such a context, the sovereignty of God means the rejection of the subjectivism that sees the human knowing subject and his values as the chief and almost sole actor in all knowledge. God himself acts and reveals himself not only beyond but within the history that we can know historically, that we can know without claiming to be lifted above our historical situation and beyond historical investigation. It means the development of a theocentric ethic that is not plagued by subjectivism, but that is theocentric within the limits of the particular historical situation. These are all essential factors that were present as Niebuhr developed his fundamental concern about the sovereignty of God. The question that Niebuhr took over from Troeltsch was how to affirm a strong and theocentric faith within the limits of the historically relative situation.

CHAPTER III

THE MEANING OF REVELATION: KNOWABLE SELF-MANIFESTATION OF THE SOVEREIGN

To answer the problems that Niebuhr saw in the twentieth-century context of relativism and subjectivism, he worked out his own existentialist epistemology. He shared in the general existentialist trend among Protestant theologians, but developed his own version. With a Kierkegaardian sense of irony, he called his version "social existentialism."[1] He acknowledged that the constructive side of Karl Barth strongly influenced his own epistemology, and it is clear that Martin Buber was also a major help.[2]

It may be that the surprisingly widespread and simultaneous existentialist trend in twentieth-century theology is an attempt to answer the same problems that Niebuhr saw so clearly: the problems of relativism and subjectivism. To avoid violating the limits of relativism, theology must reject the false objectivity of dogmatic orthodoxy and universal natural theology. How to reject that false objectivity without falling into the quicksand of religious subjectivism is the question. Langdon Gilkey pinpoints the significance of existentialist epistemology precisely as an answer to that question: "The great epistemological 'breakthrough,' on which neo-orthodoxy was founded and which made possible the avoidance at once of both the objectivity of orthodoxy and natural theology, on the one hand, and the subjectivity of 'religious experience,' on the other, was the theology of existential encounter."[1]

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[1] Christ and Culture, pp. 241ff.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, pp. x and 146.

Existentialism: Acceptance of the Limits of Relativism

What Langdon Gilkey observes in the general movement of theology is all the more true of H. Richard Niebuhr. If others sensed the impact of relativism with varying degrees of awareness, Niebuhr understood relativism clearly and articulately. Therefore he defined his existential epistemology with full awareness of the limits imposed by historical relativism. Perhaps we can define some of the meaning of calling Niebuhr an existentialist and of seeing his existentialism as a response to relativism if we look briefly at five characteristics of his description of the Christian knowledge of God.

First, Niebuhr makes it absolutely clear that the knower is not a detached and disinterested observer, a fixed star suspended above the changing tides of history. The knower is an involved self whose perspective affects the content of his knowledge. As a matter of fact, his selfhood is an inseparable and indispensable part of his knowledge. His having a particular and involved faith-commitment is not only a necessary evil but a necessary good, because theology's object of knowledge inherently calls for value-relationships. Theology, like any other kind of knowledge, is directed toward particular kinds of objects from a particular perspective for particular reasons and with particular methods. The same requirement holds for the natural sciences; they

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[1] Langdon Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," Journal of Religion, XLIII (July, 1963), 181-82.

> have learned that if they are to proceed with their proper work it is necessary for them to be single-minded, directing their attention to their objects, developing methods corresponding to those objects, and not . . . changing their standpoint from single-minded observation to the interestedness of men concerned about the value of science itself or about the victory of some proletarian, democratic or religious cause.[1]

For similar reasons, Christian theology has its necessary standpoint and methods that fit its object:

> Whatever be the case in other human inquiries there is no such thing as disinterestedness in theology, since one cannot speak of God and gods at all save as valued beings or as values which cannot be apprehended save by a willing, feeling, responding self. Theology . . . may take the position of faith in some other being, that is of an interest directed more or less exclusively toward religion, or toward the moral consciousness, or toward man's own worth, or toward civilization. When it follows one of these latter interests it does not become more disinterested and objective than when it takes the point of view of Christian faith; it simply becomes primarily interested in something that faith in God must regard as too narrow and finite to be a substitute for the Father of Jesus Christ. And when such theology turns to the latter being from the point of view of its dominant faith in another valued entity it does not really turn to the Christian God at all as Christian faith knows him, but rather to some instrumental value which serves its major interest.[2]

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[1] Meaning of Revelation, p. 35.

[2] Ibid., pp. 35-36. Cf. also ibid., pp. 7-42.

Second, the kind of knowledge that Niebuhr is interested in is the kind that redeems the knower. This knowledge is not detached data or universal principles that could be possessed without transforming the knower's existential situation.[1] As Langdon Gilkey has pointed out, this redemptive aspect of revelation is shared by the existential epistemology of most neo-orthodox theologians: "in the encounter of the inward self with God's Word in faith through the Spirit, God reveals himself and is known, and in that knowing the self is transformed; or to put it succinctly, revelation knowledge is saving knowledge."[2] Such an existential epistemology overcomes the scholastic and idealistic approaches that locate revelation in the abstract realm of supposedly universal propositional beliefs rather than in the concrete realm of faith and discipleship.[3]

Third, the object of knowledge is not so much universal principles as particular persons. Niebuhr suggests that "idea and proposition are not the right terms to employ here."[4] He emphasizes the importance of the personal nature of God for his entire theology. "The most important fact about the whole approach to revelation to which we are committed by the acceptance of our existential situation, of the point of view of faith living in history, is that we must think and speak in terms of persons."[5] Lest there be any misunderstanding,

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[1] *Ibid*., pp. 91-132.

[2] Gilkey, p. 182.

[3] Cf. *ibid*.

[4] *Meaning of Revelation*, p. 143.

[5] *Ibid*.

Niebuhr makes absolutely clear that concepts about God, moral standards, axioms, convictions, and propositional statements are a part of such knowledge.[1] But these concepts and axioms are not the central, concrete object of knowledge. They are relative referents to what is concretely known: a revealed self.

> In our history we deal with selves, not with concepts. Our universals here are not eternal objects ingredient in events but eternal persons active in particular occasions; our axioms in this participating knowledge are not self-evident convictions about the relations of such objects but certainties about fundamental, indestructible relations between persons. We need, therefore, to put our question in the following form, "What persons do we meet in the revelatory event and what convictions about personal relations become our established principles in its presence?"[2]

How do we recognize such a revealed self? How do we distinguish this eternal person active in particular occasions from other realities or from illusions? Niebuhr's existential answer is the fourth aspect of his explicit and positive response to relativism.[3] The self-revelation of God is recognized not because it breaks the laws of ordinary historical knowledge, or because it gives universal truths or unique miracles. The revelation occurs in particular, relative historical events as does the revealing action of any person.[4] And God is free to do new and different things; he often surprises us. We recognize him not on the basis of a universal knowledge which we possess, nor on the basis of an identical sameness in his historical

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1. *Ibid.*, pp. 140 and 155-59ff.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

3. The documentation and full explication of this aspect of Niebuhr's existentialism must wait for the exposition of the social nature of his existentialism below.

4. *Meaning of Revelation*, chap. ii.

actions, as if he were a static and universal principle rather than the living God. Rather we are given a relative memory of the character of a faithful self who has been present for our faith in particular historical actions. We recognize his character in a way analogous to our knowledge of a friend: he acts thus and so, he is faithful to such and such purposes, he is the same self whom we have seen acting in those revelatory occasions when we began to recognize who he is.[1] In other words, the distinguishing marks are particular and personal and historical, just as are the distinguishing marks of a friend whom we have come to know in our relative history. We need not claim to have universal knowledge of God, any more than we need claim to have universal knowledge of a friend, in order to distinguish him from others.

The fifth feature of Niebuhr's existentialism is his delineation of "inner history." This feature goes one step further than the other four in enabling Niebuhr to speak of the revelation of God within the limits of historical relativism. The first four features admit that revelation is subject to the influences of relative history. And they define the basic aspects of revelation in such a way that they need not claim to break the rules of historical relativism. But they do not establish the way for historical method to study the revelation of the sovereign Lord as a historical event.

How can a historical method that studies only the finite and relative devote itself to the revelation of the infinite and universal? "For surely what is seen in history is not a universal, absolute, independent source and goal of existence, not impartial justice nor infinite mercy, but particularity, finiteness, opinions that pass, caprice, arbitrariness, accident, brutality, wrong on the throne and right on the scaffold."[1] And how can a historical method affirm that God revealed himself in the unique event of Jesus Christ when it sees everything in a chain of cause and effect, and when it "has as little need for the hypothesis of divine action as Laplace had in his astronomy"?[2] How can it study "a present Lord and Giver of Life," whose action and rule is not primarily "a 'then and there' but a 'here and now,'" when historical method seems to be dealing with the occurrence of certain past events rather than present realities?[3] What these questions all add up to is the climactic question of _The Meaning of Revelation_, the question that echoes again and again throughout the book: "How can revelation mean both history and God?"[4]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 120-37 and 154.

The answer is twofold. The first part is the delineation of an existential "inner history" which describes human persons as selves who have faith in God or gods. Historical persons can be studied, of course, as economic selves who have economic values, or as political, racial, or military selves. But they are also ponderers of "the path of one's own destiny, . . . the why and whence and whither of one's own existence."[5] Therefore an inner history, a history that studies

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1. _Meaning of Revelation_, p. 54.
2. _Ibid_., p. 55.
3. _Ibid_., pp. 56-57.
4. _Ibid_., p. 59.
5. _Ibid_.

men from their own, their inner perspective, must also be able to deal with their ponderings and with the whences and whithers that they affirm. Niebuhr sums up his case for such a history simply and directly: "To be a self is to have a god; to have a god is to have history, that is, events connected in a meaningful pattern; to have one god is to have one history. God and the history of selves in community belong together in inseparable union."[1] In other words, looking at man as an historical and existential self, Niebuhr's description of inner history shows that "the existence of self and an object of devotion for the sake of which the self lives are inseparable."[2] It shows that there is a necessary place in the history of selves for a history of faith.

When faith functions well in the life of a self, it is given its unity by a central historical event. This unifying event, and the personal, dramatic images associated with it, illuminate the meaning of selfhood. Therefore a history of faith must concentrate on this event and these images and their meaning for selves. And such a history of faith is precisely what a historical study of revelation is. "By revelation, then, we mean that special occasion which provides us with an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible."[3] For Christians, that special occasion is Jesus Christ.[4] In sum, Niebuhr's inner history defines how revelation functions in the life of selves and therefore it defines how the history of men as ponderers of the whence and whither of their own existence must include the history of revelation, the history of events and images that give intelligibility to personal and common life. God or gods are involved in such history as the "objects of devotion for the sake of which the self lives."[1] So in the inner history of Christian faith, God and history do belong together. Even if faith is relative to the historical situation of the believer, God is involved in this history as the object of faith. As Niebuhr has said, even if the faith is not universal, there is no reason why its object may not be universal.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 80.

[2] Ibid., p. 78.

[3] Ibid., p. 109. Cf. pp. 126, 127, and 130.

[4] Ibid., pp. 43, 138-55, et passim.

Such a brief description of inner history in Niebuhr's understanding of revelation is, of course, incomplete. Niebuhr's analysis of inner history is subtle and profound, and a full discussion of it would require a departure from our main task of concentrating on the sovereignty of God.[3] Therefore, as with the other aspects of Niebuhr's existential understanding of revelation, we must simply make brief mention of the main point: Niebuhr works out an existential understanding of revelation, and he works it out in a way that intends to stay within the limits of the historical relativism defined by Ernst Troeltsch.

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[1] Ibid., p. 78. For a fuller exposition of the place of the object of loyalty or devotion in faith, see Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, chaps. i-vi, where the emphasis falls most heavily upon the first half of Niebuhr's twofold proposal for the historical study of revelation.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, p. 18.

[3] I have discussed the significance of Niebuhr's understanding of inner history more fully in my unpublished B.D. thesis, "An Interpretation of Objective Relativism in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theological Method," Union Theological Seminary, May, 1963, pp. 49-121. An excellent discussion may be found in Lonnie Dean Kliever, "Methodology and Christology in H. Richard Niebuhr," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, May 17, 1963. Kliever's entire dissertation may be considered as an interpretation of Niebuhr's concept of inner history. Kliever concentrates on the first half of Niebuhr's twofold answer to the question of history and revelation. The present study concentrates on the second half. Hans Frei, of course, has paved the way in definitive fashion on this aspect of Niebuhr's thought as on so many

Social Existentialism: Faithful Character in Action

But there is a second part to Niebuhr's twofold answer to the question, "How can revelation mean both history and God?" This second part is the key to overcoming subjectivism. It is centrally involved in Niebuhr's affirmation of the sovereignty of God. And it has been either misunderstood or not set forth by Niebuhr's interpreters.[1] Therefore it is this aspect of Niebuhr's understanding of revelation upon which we must concentrate.

This second part could be called perspectival realism, or better, objective relativism.[2] But perhaps the best name for it is social existentialism, since Niebuhr describes its meaning most clearly and most consistently by using existential models for revelation. Were it

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other aspects: "Niebuhr's Theological Background," and "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," _Faith and Ethics_, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York, 1957), pp. 9-116. Frei's two chapters in _Faith and Ethics_ are hereafter cited as Frei.

[1] For example, see the discussion of Hans Frei's interpretation below.

[2] _Meaning of Revelation_, p. 22, and _Radical Monotheism_, pp. 106 and 110ff. Cf. Daniel Day Williams, _God's Grace and Man's Hope_ (New York, 1949), pp. 40-51, for a position similar to the one I am suggesting.

not for this social existentialism, were Niebuhr's understanding of revelation to include only the aspects we have already noticed, then he might never have provided a workable way to speak of the sovereignty of God. He would not have overcome the subjectivism that he criticized as the major problem in Troeltsch and in the whole Kantian and value-theory line of march. For the understanding of revelation we have delineated so far is still open to the criticism that Hans Frei aimed at some anonymous theologians whose method sounds quite Troeltschian:

> It does not matter that later critics, operating on the same ground as Schleiermacher, accused him of subjectivism, and that they claimed in their own positive constructions to examine faith—however conceived—for its "God-relatedness" or "objective content." This is exactly what Schleiermacher had done. His critics are doing the same—even if they understand faith more "historically," "morally," "objectively," and less "aesthetically" than Schleiermacher.[1]

Faith as a part of man's selfhood would still be the center of theology, and God would still be a derivative or necessary postulate of that part of man's selfhood. Religion would still be treated "primarily as a movement immanent in the human spirit."[2]

Therefore Niebuhr said the second part of his twofold answer is a more important part.[3] Because he was seeking to go beyond the subjectivism of Schleiermacher, he insisted that there is a "self-evidencing content of revelation" which "comes to us through the historical event." And he insisted that this self-evidencing content is the first value of revelation and must be the primary interest of theology. The fact that the revelatory event makes sense of the rest of our inner history is important; but the primary matter is the truth in the revelation itself rather than the helpfulness of revelation for the life of faith.[1] Therefore, when Niebuhr worked out his existential understanding of revelation, he paid close attention to the content of the particular revelation in Jesus Christ which is central for Christian theology.[2] In other words, he remembered carefully the implications of the sovereignty of God, as those implications had become clear to him in the early thirties.

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[1] Frei, p. 43. One wonders whether Frei was aiming this criticism at Niebuhr. It fits with Frei's later criticism of Niebuhr (Ibid., pp. 72f. and 82ff.).

[2] Niebuhr's criticism of Troeltsch's subjectivism in "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 59-60.

[3] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 138-41.

In the preceding chapter we have observed the meaning of the sovereignty of God as it broke through for Niebuhr in the context of relativism and subjectivism. It meant the real rule of God over all things, the independence of God from subjective human values, and the revelation of God with noetic content in relative history. The third aspect, the rejection of Kantian agnosticism and the affirmation of knowledge-content in the revelation of God, was seen by Niebuhr as the key to all three aspects of belief in the sovereignty of God.[3]

This key is precisely what is lacking in most contemporary existential concepts of revelation. The significance of the existential foundation of neo-orthodox theology has already been pinpointed for us by Langdon Gilkey.[4] And Gilkey has also put his finger on the problem that is so widespread in this epistemological foundation: The locus and limit of the knowledge in such existentialism is the inward, personal faith encounter. In such a purely inward encounter, Gilkey explains, there can be no theological statements about God with any noetic content. "That" revelation has occurred is ringingly proclaimed, but "what" the content of revelation is remains obscured. All one can say is that man's faith is transformed in such and such a way by God's grace. And the object of theology becomes man's faith rather than God. This sounds like the very pre-existential subjectivism Niebuhr has attacked. Gilkey says of this existentialism:

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[1] Ibid. Because, of course, the sense that revelation makes of the rest of history depends on the content of the revelation.

[2] Ibid., chaps. iii and iv.

[3] Above, pp. 49ff.

[4] Above, p. 61.

> The one limiting rule is that no statement about God can be legitimately made that is not directly involved in this personal, inward relation to him in faith through Word and Spirit. Or, put another way, there are no doctrines about God's activity or being which are not at once doctrines about our personal, cognitive relation to God. From this basic principle stems one of the main characteristics of contemporary theology, namely, that in its view epistemology and theology are one; or put another way, that all theology is about our knowing of God and not about God. (One can well imagine the smile on the face of the immortal Schleiermacher at this victory over his "conquerors.")[1]

Daniel Day Williams also criticizes the existential understanding of revelation, and he diagnoses the cause of the problem. The cause of the problem is the particular model of selfhood that this kind of existentialism uses for its understanding of God, of the self who encounters God, and of the time or history in which they meet. The model in each case is Kierkegaard's solitary individual. The model for selfhood is the hidden inwardness of an Abraham who cannot communicate any humanly recognizable assertions about his mission. It is a selfhood that exists solely outside of the time sequence of human events, a selfhood freed from external relations.[1] When this is the kind of selfhood that is involved in the divine-human encounter, then there can be no revelation with knowledge-content. God's self-manifestation, the human self to whom he reveals himself, and the encounter itself are purely inward, hidden, incommunicable, and unrelated to relative human history. "A final consequence of Kierkegaard's view is that it becomes inconceivable how God can share in the actual processes of human experience. 'The eternal . . . has absolutely no history.'"[2]

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[1] Langdon Gilkey, op. cit., p. 183. See also pp. 182-89.

Richard Reinhold Niebuhr and Helmut Gollwitzer both point to the same problem in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann and Herbert Braun.[3] Bultmann's and Braun's Heideggerian antipathy against objectifying the selfhood of God drives them to the extreme of speechlessness concerning God. All they can speak of is the unfolding of a new self-understanding in man. God is the "whence" of this new self-understanding. Gollwitzer concludes that this method "of speaking of God only as of a determination of my existence, and the prohibition of making assertions about God himself, is then a way of saying that there is no longer to be any speaking of God at all, but only of states and changes in human existence.[4] And this is a path that leads close to atheism. We must "carefully examine the question of the conditions under which existentialist interpretation of the Bible message—secretly and perhaps unintentionally—can become an atheistic interpretation."[1]

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[1] Williams, God's Grace and Man's Hope, pp. 119-29.

[2] Ibid., p. 126. Williams refers to S. Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments (Princeton, 1942), p. 62.

[3] Richard R. Niebuhr, Resurrection and Historical Reason (New York, 1957), pp. 53 and 61-62; Helmut Gollwitzer, The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 60, 65-67, 76, 96-97, 129-30, 177, et passim.

[4] Gollwitzer, p. 35.

The same problem may be a major reason for William Hamilton's derailment from neo-orthodoxy. Hamilton repeatedly states that the lack of content in this neo-orthodox understanding of revelation caused a growing emptiness in his understanding of God, an emptiness that finally collapsed into nothingness. For example, he writes:

> I knew that the real theological issue for me was the doctrine of God. I had always thought of myself as pretty much at home in the inherited world defined by the Christian doctrine of revelation: you can't know him, but he has made himself known to you. The rather frail character of my actual working knowledge of God I had managed to justify by a series of devices. . . . But all this was becoming less and less plausible.[2]

What is important for our purposes is to notice how clearly and directly H. Richard Niebuhr sees this problem and overcomes it in his existential understanding of revelation. Both Niebuhr and Hans Frei make the same criticisms and point to the same problems in the individualism of the Kierkegaardian, Bultmannian, and early Barthian varieties of existentialism. The problem with individualistic existentialism as both Niebuhr and Frei see it is its tendency to locate a self in a thin and abstract isolation away from its communication with other selves.[1] The true self, according to this individualistic existentialism, is not limited or conditioned by relations with other selves.[2] To say anything with structure and content about such an unique and individual self is to offend, malign, and distort it by trying to turn it into an object.[3] Hence when there is meeting or encounter between selves, the one self can speak only negatively about the other self, saying "I am aware that I am being encountered and limited by an other whom I am unable to describe." Any positive description would distort the uniqueness and individuality of the true, unconditioned, other self.[4] When this individualistic existentialism becomes the basic model for revelation, the revelatory event is reduced to an encounter between unknowable inner selves, an encounter which in principle tends to be devoid of structure, content, and history.[5]

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[1] Ibid., p. 51.

[2] William Hamilton, "The Shape of Radical Theology," The Christian Century, LXXXII (October 6, 1965), 1219. Cf. Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, Radical Theology and the Death of God (Indianapolis, New York, and Kansas City, 1966), pp. 27, 35, 84, and 108.

One result of this reduction is a dualism that puts God and the inner self of the believer in one realm, and society, law, nature, and much of history in another.[6] A well-known example of such an individualistic understanding of the basic human-divine encounter is to be found in Emil Brunner. His existentialism results in the ethical narrowing of revelation, persons, and love so that they deal only with individuals and have little to do with the realm of society and justice.[1]

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[1] Frei, pp. 18ff. and 80-81. Niebuhr, "On the Nature of Faith," Religious Experience and Truth, edited by Sidney Hook (New York, 1961), pp. 99-101; Christ and Culture, pp. 179ff.; The Responsible Self, pp. 70ff., 92, and 120.

[2] Frei, p. 82. Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, pp. 179ff. and 241-49.

[3] Frei, pp. 49 and 81. Christ and Culture, pp. 24-25.

[4] Christ and Culture, p. 147. Frei, pp. 48-49 and 80-81.

[5] Frei, pp. 49 and 81. Christ and Culture, pp. 24-25. The Responsible Self, pp. 92f.

[6] Gilkey, pp. 181ff. Christ and Culture, pp. 173-74, 179 and 186-89; The Responsible Self, p. 92.

The particular example of such individualistic existentialism that Niebuhr directly singles out in the introduction to Christ and Culture is Rudolf Bultmann's Heideggerian existentialism. Niebuhr expresses great kinship with Bultmann's concern "for I-Thou relations between God and man and between men."[2] But he sees a major problem. "Bultmann," he charges, "can find no real content in the gospel idea of obedience. . . . Moreover, although God is mentioned as the one whose will is to be obeyed, the idea of God ascribed to Jesus is as empty and formal as the idea of obedience."[3] Niebuhr tags Bultmann's individualistic existentialism with the same error that was committed by the subjectivistic value-theory epistemology: "Just as for liberalism God is the counterpart of human love, so in this existentialism He becomes the mere counterpart of moral decision."[4]

Niebuhr criticizes the limitations of individualistic existentialism even more strongly than does Frei.[5] But surprisingly, Frei's otherwise precise, perceptive, and definitive discussion of Niebuhr's theological method proceeds as if it were unaware of Niebuhr's departure from the individualistic position. Frei's discussion bases its exposition of Niebuhr's existentialism on an analysis of Kierkegaard's existentialism.[1] But Niebuhr's responsible self finds its archetypal model in the communal self, the social self of Buber, not the hidden, inward individual self of Kierkegaard.[2]

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[1] For a clear and careful delineation of this problem and its implications in Brunner's thought, see N. Patrick Murray, "Personalism in the Ethical Theory of Emil Brunner," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 1962).

[2] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

[3] Christ and Culture, p. 24.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Compare their criticisms in the passages indicated in the footnotes for the paragraphs immediately above.

Niebuhr maintains that the concrete self is to be found in relation, not isolation. Selves live and breathe in community with other selves acting faithfully and unfaithfully toward one another. It is simply a "fact that persons exist only in 'I-Thou' relations," rather than in isolated individuality.[3] A self's relation with other selves is not merely an external accident but the very essence of selfhood: "We do not only live among other selves but they live in us and we in them. Relations here are not external but internal so that we are our relations and cannot be selves save as we are members of each other."[4] To put it in his own clear terms:

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[1] Frei, pp. 79-84. With some justification, of course, since Niebuhr certainly did indicate appreciation of many contributions which Kierkegaard made, as in "A 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript,'" chap. vii of Christ and Culture, pp. 230-56, and Niebuhr, "Sören Kierkegaard," Christianity and the Existentialists, edited by Carl Michalson (New York, 1956), pp. 41-42.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, pp. x, 65, and 146; The Responsible Self, pp. 70-76ff. Compare Christ and Culture, pp. 179-81, with Martin Buber, Between Man and Man, Ronald G. Smith, translator (n.p., n.d.), pp. 40-82, and especially pp. 50-52, 58, and 65. See also Niebuhr, "Foreword," Self, Society, Existence, by Paul E. Pfuetze (New York, 1961), p. vi, and Radical Monotheism, pp. 103-05, for the influence of G. H. Mead along with Buber.

[3] Christ and Culture, p. 181.

[4] Meaning of Revelation, p. 70.

> To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial. To be able to say that I am I is not an inference from the statement that I think thoughts nor from the statement that I have a law-acknowledging conscience. It is, rather, the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self. The exploration of this dimension of self-existence has taken place in many areas of modern man's thinking; many lines of inquiry have converged on the recognition that the self is fundamentally social, in this sense that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as self only in that relation.[1]

If an existential epistemology is an epistemology based on the concrete actuality of selfhood, then it must begin where selves actually are. The concrete situation with which existential epistemology must begin is not an inner consciousness separated from isolated things-in-themselves, needing to experience some sort of sense data or intuitions or categories or values in order to infer the existence of the hidden external other. The primordial, original, concrete reality is selves in community with other selves.[2] This means that our knowledge of a self in its social relations is not merely knowledge of a husk hiding the true, unrelated self. The real self, the primordial self, is the self in social relation.

In this concrete situation of interrelatedness, we come to know other selves in their actions. The self that is known is no disconnected vapor only vaguely attached to his action. The true self is a self that acts, a self that discloses himself in his acts. "To know a knower is to begin with the activity of the other who knows us or reveals himself to us by his knowing activity."[3] Niebuhr states it

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1. The Responsible Self, p. 71. See also pp. 72ff.

2. Ibid., pp. 71ff.

3. Meaning of Revelation, p. 145.

simply and straightforwardly: "Selves are known in act or not at all."[1]

Such acts of disclosure do not involve simply contentless inward encounter or vague mystical intuition. They involve the encounter of another self in self-disclosing action that is specific and particular. "It cannot be enough to say that in revelation we meet the divine self, for if this meeting is pure immediacy which does not provide us with truths about God it would remain incommunicable and unable to provide the reasoning heart with principles of understanding."[2] Revelation does provide truths about God because it is the disclosure of a self in action. Revelation provides the kind of truths that are given in acts of interpersonal disclosure.

> It is like a decisive moment in the common life of friends. In the face of some emergency a man may act so as to reveal a quality undisclosed before. Through that revelatory moment his friend is enabled to understand past actions which had been obscure and to prophesy the future behavior of the revealer.[3]

The particular nature and character of the Thou who acts becomes clear to us not only because of what we see in a present instance. We receive additional knowledge of another person by discerning the relation between present action and the larger pattern of actions that we remember from a long past. "In actual practice . . . the other and his actions are not atomic events or occasions to which atomic reactions are made; they are particular demonstrations of an enduring movement or particular parts of a continuous discourse."[4]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 146. See also pp. 65-73 and 129-30.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 175-76.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[4] *The Responsible Self*, p. 77.

We remember other acts of disclosure, and we are therefore able to interpret patterns, meanings, and intentions that are both hidden behind and expressed in events that occur in our relation with the other.[1]

And our understanding of the character of the other is not limited to what we observe by ourselves. We acquire still more information from our neighbors. For the Thou whom we seek to know is a Thou whose actions of disclosure occur "in constant response-relations to other Thou's and It's."[2] The community of persons that has given us our language, and that continues to converse with us, clarifies and enriches our understanding of the Thou:

> Beyond the constancy in the attitude of the Thou toward me there is now to be considered the constancy in his interactions with members of the community other than myself. When I speak I do not address myself to a generalized other or to an impartial spectator but to particular selves in whose interactions with each other and with the objects of discourse there is a constancy on which I have learned to depend. . . . The social self is never a mere I-Thou self but an I-_You_ self, responding to a Thou that is a member of an interacting community. And in its interaction with others, constancies have been demonstrated which enable the self to interpret the action upon him.[3]

It is already clear that such a rich context of disclosing actions, remembered patterns, and community interpretations is far from contentless encounter. But more can be said. In such a social existentialism, the self that is revealed is not unlimited and unconditioned. By its own act of disclosure, and by its faithfulness of character, the revealed self is involved and committed. In Jesus Christ we do not see a God who is detached and removed; in him "we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom."[1] In our unfaith we had thought of God as the impersonal "fate which lowers over us in our communities;" now this fate "reveals itself to be a person in community with us."[2] When the Christian faith speaks of Jesus Christ, it is not enough to speak of human loyalty toward a hidden Infinity; "unless there enters into our existence the demonstration, as it were, of the loyalty of the Lord of Heaven and earth to this One who was so loyal to Him and so loyal to his fellow-man we can't believe in God."[3] In the cross of Christ "the great divine, dominating purpose" is demonstrated for us.[4] To this demonstration of the faithful commitment of God we owe the origin, the calling forth, of our faith.[5] The involvement and commitment of this person in community with us is a strong Biblical theme; it is called promise and covenant:

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[1] _Ibid_., pp. 62-63 and 136.

[2] _Ibid_., p. 77.

[3] _Ibid_., pp. 77-78. Cf. _Christ and Culture_, pp. 245-49, for an important and concise statement of these issues.

> To have faith is to believe _in_, to count upon or rely upon another, particularly on another person as one who has made promises or has bound himself in covenant relations to the person who has faith in him. It is this meaning of faith which Luther especially emphasized, and in doing so seems to have been in harmony with the Hebrew Scriptures. . . .[6]

Niebuhr knows there are dangerous, idolatrous ways of objectifying our dogmas about the nature of God. But he rejects the solution suggested by individualistic existentialism's picture of an unknown and unconditioned pure subject whose self-revelation has no content.

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[1] _Meaning of Revelation_, p. 93.

[2] _Ibid_., p. 153.

[3] Niebuhr, "The Triad of Faith," _Andover Newton Bulletin_, XLVII (October, 1954), 10.

[4] _Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 123-25.

[5] Niebuhr, "On the Nature of Faith," p. 99.

[6] _Ibid_., p. 98.

> The animus of such [individualistic] existentialism against speculative and naturalistic ideas of God can be understood, but the ascription to Jesus of this twentieth century view of freedom results in a caricature of the New Testament Christ. For the Jesus who is radically obedient knows that the will of God is the will of the Creator and Governor of all nature and of all history; that there is structure and content in His will; that He is the author of the ten commandments; that He demands mercy and not sacrifice; that He requires not only obedience to Himself but love and faith in Him, and love of the neighbor whom He creates and loves. This Jesus is radically obedient; but he also knows that love and faith alone make obedience possible, and that God is the bestower of all these gifts. His obedience is a relation to a God who is much more than an "Unconditioned," met in the moment of decision . . .[1]

In all this, Niebuhr is arguing against contentless radical obedience. He is arguing on the basis of the Biblical faith. And he insists that according to the Biblical faith God is much more than an "Unconditioned"; God is committed to His faithful way of relating to men. This faithful way is revealed in particular, relative action that is interpreted by a particular, relative community. The giving of the ten commandments is an example of such a commitment in action. If we want to avoid dangerous, idolatrous ways of objectifying our dogmas about the nature of God, we can find no solution in revelation without content. We find the solution in remembering that our understanding of the nature of God is a relative interpretation of the commitment of a self in interpersonal action. God is the Governor of history whose active rule the prophets proclaim. God acts, and He is known with the particular structure and content that we discern in his faithful, self-disclosing action.

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[1] Christ and Culture, pp. 24-25.

The structure and content of such interpersonal existential knowledge is like the structure and content of our knowledge of another human self. It is the sort of knowledge that is given when a self reveals himself in faithful action among a community of selves. Qualities of character, ways of acting in relation to others, indications of purpose or intention or will, and the self itself, are given in revelation.[1]

The difference between these revelatory acts and acts that are understood in an objectified, impersonal, behavioristic sense is not that they are private, inward, and purely subjective. The difference is that they are interpersonal and intentional, revelatory and moral.[2] They involve the revealed intention of a living self, not a static idea. They involve the moral transformation of the knower, not merely his detached assent. And they involve personal loyalty to a cause. In other words, they are not abstract objectifications but existential relations.[3]

In sum, Niebuhr's social existentialism shares the existential concern of other types of existentialism. It shares an understanding of revelation as personal, dynamic, relative, and as involving transformation and commitment of the human self. It shares an understanding of the freedom of the living God in his revelation; the living God cannot be possessed as a mere static truth. It rejects the detached observation of a purely external and behavioristic act as its model for revelation; such a detached observation may have knowledge-content but it lacks selfhood. But Niebuhr's social existentialism does not become reactionary. It does not retreat to the encounter of a purely inward and individual self, an encounter without knowledge-content. Instead, Niebuhr's social existentialism thinks in terms of the interpersonal, faithful act of a responsible self. If God's self-disclosure is like the disclosure of a responsible, faithful self in action in the midst of history and community, then it gives knowledge with content. It enables men to make statements about God and to communicate their understanding to one another. Their statements do not claim to possess God as if he were a static proposition rather than a living self, but they are statements with knowledge-content nevertheless.

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[1] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 129-30. The Responsible Self, pp. 62-63 and 136.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 72-73.

[3] See the summary above of some of the existential features of Niebuhr's epistemology, pp. 62-69.

What such social existentialism means for Niebuhr's understanding of revelation is now obvious. When he speaks of the revelation of God as the revelation of a self, his image of selfhood comes from his social existentialism, not from a Kierkegaardian or Bultmannian individualism. God's self-revelation has the particular structure and content of interpersonal, faithful action. It involves particular acts on the part of God toward man like the acts we see in Jesus Christ. It involves a commitment to a way of relating to man such as Christ-like love. It involves loyalty to particular purposes or causes such as reconciliation. The particular kinds of revelatory action and interpersonal relation and loyalty are not arbitrary but permanent and indestructible since the acts are the self-disclosure of God, who is eternal and faithful. Our faith is that he will always be faithful to his revelation in Jesus Christ. So in his activity in Christ we know his permanent way of relating to men. We know his indestructible loyalty to the causes for which Jesus Christ worked.[1]

Niebuhr's description of "the God of revelation"[2] does not disappoint such an expectation. His description affirms commitments to ways of relating and acting toward men, and commitments to particular purposes and loyalties. Thus the living God, the eternal self, is known in his activity in Jesus Christ "not as the one beyond the many but as the one who acts in and through all things, not as the unconditioned but as the conditioner."[3] "The power of God is made manifest in the weakness of Jesus, in the meek and dying life which through death is raised to power."[4] And so with the goodness of God: "Here is goodness that empties itself, and makes itself of no reputation, a goodness that is all outgoing, reserving nothing for itself, yet having all things."[1] This is positive knowledge with structure and content: He is the One who acts now in the same characteristic manner as he did in Jesus Christ.[2] In chapters viii and ix below we shall examine the particular content that Niebuhr emphasized. The point here is that Niebuhr could make such affirmations because his epistemology affirmed that the faithful action of God discloses His nature and is not to be divorced from Himself. The real character of God is not aloof from what we see of his involvement in particular, finite events.

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[1] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 86-87, 143, 154, 166-68, and 183ff.; "On the Nature of Faith," pp. 99-100; Christ and Culture, pp. 14ff. Hans Frei's development of the implications of Niebuhr's social existentialism for knowing the person of Jesus Christ is clear and important (Frei, pp. 108ff.). When he deals with Niebuhr's understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, Frei sees the importance of Niebuhr's social existentialism. The only place where Frei slips into interpreting Niebuhr in terms of individualistic existentialism is in his discussion of Niebuhr's doctrine of God (pp. 79ff.).

[2] Meaning of Revelation, p. 175.

[3] Ibid., p. 183.

[4] Ibid., p. 187.

It is clear, then, that Niebuhr must be interpreted not in Kierkegaardian terms but in Niebuhr's own more social and historical terms, terms similar to those of Buber. So understood, he can speak of the active self-giving of the living God, of the knowability of the character, the ways of acting, the purposes and the very self of the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. His social existentialism recovers something that is in danger of being lost by nineteenth-century subjectivistic pietism as well as by twentieth-century individualistic existentialism. It recovers the sovereignty of God. It recovers the possibility for a theology that is simultaneously theocentric, existential, and concretely historical. It recovers this because it presents a critical understanding of the interpersonal, historical revelation of a self who does not remain purely aloof and isolated, but who enables us to understand his sovereignty by giving himself concretely in his action in a particular historical community.

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[1] Ibid., p. 190.

[2] Cf. ibid., pp. 93, 125, 132, 166, and 176. Also cf. Christ and Culture, pp. 106, 190-91, 195, and 213; The Responsible Self, pp. 155, 163, and 173-75.

It should not come as a surprise that Niebuhr's way of speaking has one further distinct quality—a Biblical ring. The Biblical sound in his way of speaking is easy to understand when we remember the importance of Barth and Buber in Niebuhr's development. Like Barth and Buber, Niebuhr intentionally set out to recover some of the strength of the Biblical standpoint. The recovery of the early Christian church's way of confessing its faith was part of Niebuhr's task from the start:

> The evangelists of the New Testament and their successors . . . did not speak of events, as impersonally apprehended, but rather of what had happened to them in their community. They recalled the critical point in their own life-time when they became aware of themselves in a new way as they came to know the self on whom they were dependent. They turned to a past which was not gone but which endured in them as their memory, making them what they were. So for the later church, history was always the story of "our fathers," of "our Lord," and of the actions of "our God."[1]

We hear the familiar themes of an existential, confessional stance. And we hear, too, the themes of self-revelation in concrete, historical action. We hear of "events," of "what had happened to them," of coming "to know the self on whom they were dependent," and of "the actions of 'our God.'"[2] The self-understanding of the early Christians was called forth by their understanding of the self on whom they were dependent. And they understood the self on whom they were dependent by remembering his actions in their midst. The Biblical understanding of the God who acts in our midst is what Niebuhr's social existentialism recovers.

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1. _Ibid_., p. 72. Cf. p. 43.

2. _Ibid_., p. 72.

But Niebuhr's social existentialism does more than recover language about God filled with content. It is the beginning of the recovery of the other aspects of the sovereignty of God as well. Because his social existentialism promises to overcome the subjectivism at the root of current epistemological troubles, it also promises to provide a meaningful way to speak of the independence of God and the universal rule of God.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEANING OF REVELATION: INDEPENDENCE AND PROVIDENCE

Revelation and God's Independence

The independence of God from human values is one of the three central motifs that we noticed in Niebuhr's advocacy of the sovereignty of God already emerging in the early thirties. The main point of his essay, "Value-Theory and Theology," is its demand for "the complete abandonment of an approach from values known as absolute prior to the experience of God."[1] The One revealed in Jesus Christ cannot be defined and validated as value theory tends to—simply in terms of his fulfilling the human need for God. To derive the character of God from the value of deity according to the human need for God is to absolutize human values; and to absolutize human values is not theocentric but idolatrous.[2]

But in order to abandon absolute prior values, Niebuhr needed some way of knowing God that is not absolutely dependent on such values. The barricade in the path was the Kantian agnosticism that reappeared in almost every nineteenth-century theologian. Kantian agnosticism barred the way to any knowledge of God except knowledge gained by inference from human values. So Kant drove theology to sole dependence on value theory.[1]

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[1] P. 110 and pp. 93-116. Frei (p. 73) does not take account of this demand, apparently.

[2] "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 110 and 114; Meaning of Revelation, pp. 162-63; Frei, p. 72.

We have already begun to see how Niebuhr's social existentialism provides the necessary alternative to Kant. It provides an understanding of revelation that can include real knowledge with content. There is knowledge of God, knowledge of His way of acting in relation to man. This knowledge is not merely derived from prior human values; its content begins with historical events that Christians remember as the self-revealing acts of God. The kind of existential knowledge that Niebuhr worked out guards against and rejects the false objectivism that claims to have a universal perspective; but it does have the relatively objective content that historical knowledge can have. It does have content which is not merely derived from prior subjective values.

Niebuhr's social existentialism contends that the prior reality in revelation is not the individual subjective knower, but the self who makes himself known. God, not my subjective values, is the chief actor in revelation. Niebuhr's focus is centered on the free and active self-giving of the eternal Thou. Such a clarity of focus on the action of the self who is doing the revealing rather than on the subjective knower is, according to Niebuhr, a major contribution of the thought of Martin Buber. Buber's epistemology correctly ascribes the primary activity in revelation to the other who is doing the revealing:

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[1] See above, pp. 25-28 and 43-57.

> This knowledge does not run from a subject to an object but from the other to the self and back again. We cannot know here save as we are known. We cannot be the doers but must first suffer knowledge of ourselves. To know a knower is to begin with the activity of the other who knows us or reveals himself to us by his knowing activity. No amount of initiative on our part will serve to uncover the hidden self-activity. It must make itself manifest or it cannot be known. . . . No deductions or inductions here can lead to certainty. Knowledge of other selves must be received and responded to. Where there is no response it is evident that there is no knowledge, but our activity is the second and not the first thing. . . . Selves are known in act or not at all. Martin Buber, more than any other thinker of our object-obsessed time, has analyzed this relationship for us in his significant book, I and Thou. "The Thou," he writes, "meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. . . . The Thou meets me. But I step into direct relationship to it. Hence the relationship means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one."[1]

The central feature of such an understanding of revelation is the primacy of the revealer's coming and meeting the knower. Niebuhr italicizes St. Augustine's confession and makes it the final sentence of The Meaning of Revelation: "I do not say to thee, seek the way. The way itself is come to thee: arise and walk."[2]

So Niebuhr's theological ethics has a beginning point that is independent in source from value-theory and prior to it. This independent beginning point is the revelatory action of God. Because revelation involves the knowledge content that is communicated in self-disclosing action, value-theory is not the sole source of knowledge content. And because such interpersonal knowing "must begin with the activity of the other . . . who reveals himself to us by his knowing activity" rather than with our own knowing, we must focus first on the revelatory activity rather than on human values known prior to revelation.[1] In other words, Niebuhr's social existentialism gives him an epistemology which can speak meaningfully of the independence of God from human values. It enables him to contend that in revelation the surprising, transforming activity of God is prior to value-theory.[2] Value-theory still must have a place in theology, but its place is clearly subordinate, as an aspect of human existence to be related to revelation.[3]

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[1] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 145-46.

[2] Ibid., p. 191.

Thus Niebuhr advocates that the starting point should be revelation. In this he follows Barth. But he does not throw out value-theory altogether. He does not follow Barth in his refusal to relate revelation to human value-cognitions.[4] What Niebuhr wants is to keep a place for value-theory without allowing it to be primary or ultimately determinative. He wants to accept Barth's main point, the primacy of revelation, while not ignoring the truth he learned from Troeltsch: the importance of the values of our historical era in conditioning our knowledge of revelation.

Niebuhr's solution to the problem of relating human values and revelation can be summarized in five propositions: (1) new values are given in revelation; (2) these new values are not simply derived from general human values known before revelation, but come from the content of historical, revelatory action; (3) general human values do influence our understanding of the content of historical revelation; (4) but the revelation is prior in importance; (5) and the revelation transforms our general human values in a revolutionary way.[1] The first four of these propositions depend on the revelation with noetic content that we have been discussing. Their meaning is already clear. The fifth can be indicated briefly.

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[1] _Ibid_., pp. 145-46 and 175-91. It was on the basis of Hans Frei's contention that individualistic existentialism could not give knowledge content that he concluded Niebuhr must be driven to exclusive reliance on value-theory for knowledge of God. (Frei, pp. 83-84.) But we have seen that Niebuhr's existentialism is not of this individualistic nature.

[2] "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 101, 110-11, and 116; _Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 164ff. and 182.

[3] Compare "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 110-11, with Frei, p. 73.

[4] "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 110-11; Niebuhr, "The Center of Value," _Radical Monotheism_, pp. 111-13 _et passim_.

The final section of the concluding chapter of *The Meaning of Revelation* is titled "Human Value and the God of Revelation."[2] There Niebuhr's transformationist or conversionist method is outlined. Such transformationism recognizes the place in our faith of values that we have learned prior to revelation. But transformationism as Niebuhr outlines it insists repeatedly that revelation adds a new element that surprises our expectations and transforms our prior concepts of deity. This new element, this revelation of God in Jesus Christ, takes up our values and transforms them in a manner that includes both fulfillment and revolutionary discontinuity. "It is revolutionary since it makes a new beginning and puts an end to the old development."[3]

A major contention of Niebuhr's important essay, "The Center of Value," is that God transcends all values and value-systems. As

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1. "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 97, 101, and 115-16.

2. *Meaning of Revelation*, pp. 175ff.

3. *Ibid*., p. 182 and viii. Cf. Frei, pp. 75-78.

the source of value, God is the transcendent absolute who affirms many other finite values. As the source of "that which is," he is prior to all valuation.[1] In The Meaning of Revelation, Niebuhr affirms that prior human values are involved in revelation, but he insists that God in his revelation is free to surprise our prior anticipations. God often fulfills our values by turning them upside down.[2]

And so we see that Niebuhr is able to maintain the independence of our knowledge of God from the general human values that are a part of our historical conditioning. He is able to emphasize this essential aspect of the sovereignty of God because of his understanding of revelation. By means of his social existentialism, he has solved the problems he saw in Troeltsch. The sovereign God has begun to save us from the provincialism of our little corner in history because this sovereign God has given us not merely a vague encounter but the memory of his own faithful character in his self-revelatory action within relative history.

But there is one remaining question about the independence or transcendence of God. Niebuhr writes repeatedly of God as the eternal Thou and the universal Lord. How does his understanding of revelation enable him to affirm the transcendence of God in these terms? We recall Troeltsch's difficulty over the problem of the eternal and universal nature of God.[3] Troeltsch conceived of God as something like an idea in the minds of men. Universality meant that all men are aware of the idea. Eternality meant that the idea is the same for all men; it is unchanging. But the revelation that we know is relative. All our knowledge changes with time and place. So Troeltsch was forced back into the subjectivism that he was trying to escape. The universal and eternal God is unknowable for relative man except as an inference or an intuition.

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[1] "The Center of Value," pp. 110-13.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 182-90; also pp. 163, 177-82, and 109-32.

[3] See above, p. 88.

Niebuhr answers with his more dynamic, Biblical, and existential understanding of revelation. His type of existentialism replaces Troeltsch's idealism. Niebuhr conceives of God on the analogy of a faithful self who remains true to himself as revealed. The standard to which God remains true is himself, a living Thou, not a common human certainty to be possessed, not a static human dogma, not a human value or a changeless, eternal truth in the minds of men.[1] The living God can be true to himself, a living, ever new reality, while surprising us and judging our provincial understandings of him. The guarantee of his remaining true everywhere and always is his faithfulness, his loyalty that he demonstrates in his particular revelatory action; it is not a conclusion which we infer from the implicit sameness of the beliefs of all men. The living God can promise to be sovereign everywhere without our knowing in advance how he will exercise his sovereignty.[2]

His eternity is seen in his living faithfulness rather than in an unchanging truth of a more static and purely propositional sort.

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[1] Meaning of Revelation, p. 41.

[2] Ibid., pp. 132-37.

His faithfulness, his sovereign power, and his demonstrated loyalty are disclosed in his revelatory action, and we trust him to be faithful always and everywhere to his character as revealed. But we do not expect him to be everywhere absolutely identical, as if he were an impersonal law.

His universality is seen not in the universality of our knowledge of him, not in the fact that we know principles about God which are admitted at least implicitly or gropingly by all men of all times. His universality is seen, rather, in what he does in the particular, relative historical happenings that we do know. We know his transcendence of our relative situation not by observing that all other men also believe in him. Rather, we notice first that he judges all our attempts to make him our particular possession. Second, we notice that he transforms our loyalties from self-centeredness toward universal inclusiveness. And third, we notice that he promises to be faithful in all history. All this is part of his particular revelatory action.[1] His transcendence, in other words, is that of a living Self, who reveals himself as unencompassable in a finite formulation of truth. He reveals himself as positively opposed to and destructive of self-serving religion. His law

> is the law of a living contemporary being, new in every new moment and therefore forever changing in its specific form. No merely traditional way of doing things is right in the presence of the living authority. What is commanded by God is commanded anew in every new moment for that moment, though the faithfulness of the will binds all the moments together and gives abiding direction amid the novelties of changing days.[2]

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 141-43 and 165; *Christ and Culture*, pp. 226-27.

[2] *Meaning of Revelation*, pp. 167-68.

The universality of God is seen in His faithfulness, which we can know in faith but can not possess or exhaust.

Because the other who meets us is a living self, he is free to be the same self in new ways. He is known as a thou, not possessed as an it. Our knowledge of him is the knowledge of person in relation, which if loyal rather than idolatrous, leaves him free to be faithful in his own way and does not try to capture and possess him. It trusts him to be creatively faithful to his self-revelation.[1] And because the other who meets us in Christian revelation is God, we must look for his creative faithfulness in all events; though he has revealed himself to us centrally in our history, we must not act as if he were captured by our history. He is able to perform new acts everywhere that are faithful to his central revelation in Jesus Christ but still new.[2]

It is interesting to notice that Niebuhr prefers not to point to an event and say directly, "This is God's action." Rather, he usually says, "We believe," or better, "We have been given faith," that the one we meet in the event is God. He wishes always to guard against absolutizing a relative faith into an idolatry that claims to possess God. He often uses the passive voice to point out a particular way that our existence has been determined. Then he either allows the reader to discern in faith the identity of the Determiner, or else waits until the climax of a poem of praise to call the name of Him whom we encounter. Thus in the summary passage which we noticed above,[1] we are referred to "what happened to them in their community," the critical happening by which the New Testament community "became aware of themselves as they came to know the self on whom they were dependent . . . making them what they were." Finally the passage suggests that these are "the actions of 'our God.'"[2] Or again, as the climax of Christ and Culture is approached, we are reminded that "before we choose to live we have been chosen into existence, and have been determined to love life as a value."[3] Many such determinations of human existence are mentioned, all in passive voice with the agent unnamed. Four pages later, a poem of praise erupts for the "miracle beyond understanding": The conviction has entered our history that this power we call fate and chance is faithful and utterly trustworthy; faith in the God of Christ's faith has been called forth in us.[4] God acts freely in ways consistent with his faithful and sovereign selfhood, and so Niebuhr leads his readers to look for God's action without actually having the holy name pronounced. As members of the Christian community, like the members of the Jewish community, we are to recog-

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[1] Ibid., p. 41. Cf. The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York, 1956), pp. 43-44. Possession is the sort of knowledge one can have of an it, a dead thing or a static principle or an object in one's control. (Meaning of Revelation, p. 41.) Non-possessive faith in a thou is not possession, but it is knowledge with content. It possesses a guiding memory of the thou, it experiences and speaks of the faithfulness of the thou as revealed and reliable but ever new, it participates in contemporaneous community with others who witness to the Thou and it participates in community with Him who is ever contemporaneous. Christ and Culture, pp. 245-49; Meaning of Revelation, pp. 86f., 152-54, and 177.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, p. 86 et passim.

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1. See above, p. 88.

2. Meaning of Revelation, pp. 72-73.

3. Christ and Culture, p. 250.

4. Ibid., p. 254.

nize in faith the ways of God, and respond with the faithful acknowledgment—"Thou art my God."[1] Thus a social existentialism akin to Buber's provides a way to assert the noetic givenness of God in revelation while neither equating revelation with the establishment of static truths, nor forgetting the transcendence of the living God, nor abstracting the revelatory event from its existential and redemptive interpersonal context. It may be conceded that further development of such an existentialism would be desirable. But its fruitfulness for expressing both transcendence and positive knowledge is highly promising. Such promise is no mean accomplishment in an age no longer essentialist, an age that has difficulty speaking of anything transcendent, an age that sees God either as an ideological slogan or as a transcendent unknowable.

Revelation and God's Providence

The third aspect of the sovereignty of God that we discovered in Niebuhr's early writings is the rule of the "I am that I am" over all things. The governing activity of God, the providence of God, is a favorite theme of Niebuhr's. But it is not a favorite theme in contemporary theology.

Langdon Gilkey has observed that providence is the forgotten stepchild of contemporary theology.[2] He has pointed out the weaknesses caused by this neglect.[1] And he has also put his finger on what he argues is the major cause of the neglect. The major cause is akin to what we have called individualistic existentialism.

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[1] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 43, 88, and 152-54.

[2] Gilkey, pp. 171ff.

> For Providence concerns God's relations to ordinary events as such, events in nature and in history generally, among, so to speak, both the dinosaurs and the Chinese. Thus Providence speaks of the relations of God to creatures quite outside the special, revealing acts of God, and also outside the inward faith response of believing men. With this point we have, I think, reached the deepest reason for the demise of Providence in our day. . . . Because this doctrine concerns the relation of God to events by definition beyond the scope of the faith relation, we can find in our epistemology very little ground for speaking or thinking about it.[2]

Our existential epistemology, Gilkey contends, limits us to statements about the inward faith response of believing men. The reason for this limitation is the dualism that locates revelation solely within an inner history where dinosaurs and Chinese, natural events and people who are not inside our faith experience, are excluded. In such an inner history there can be no knowledge of what is going on outside the individual's inward experience of faith. "Thus those whose theology is purely 'existentialist' or 'faith-centered' (Berdyaev, Bultmann, and Aulen) are inclined to dismiss theological discussion of [the relation of God to events beyond the scope of the faith relation] as objective speculations 'irrelevant to faith.'"[3]

Hans Frei interprets Niebuhr as if he, too, had such a dualism. Frei is largely correct when he says: "Niebuhr suggested that side by side with the 'eternal,' scientific method there is an existential, participative or 'internal' understanding of history."[1] But Frei's statement must be qualified by the objective character of Niebuhr's relativism.[2] Niebuhr's inner history concentrates not merely upon the experience of inward faith, but upon _what is seen from_ the experience of faith.[3] What is seen from that standpoint is a Lord who acts, who is independent from our faith perspective.[4] The difference between this inner history and external history is not that inner history deals with faith while external history deals with independent realities, or that inner history is subjective while external history is objective. Both inner and outer history are conditioned by their relative perspectives. They are both objective in the sense that they describe independent realities as seen from their different and equally relative perspectives.[5]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 174-75, 178-79, and 184-86.

[2] Ibid., p. 184.

[3] Ibid.

Frei continues: "Niebuhr has suggested that this interpretation is parallel to the Kantian distinction between pure theoretical and practical reason, the basis for which is to be found not in the nature of the object but in the forms governing our understanding."[6] Again, this is basically right. Niebuhr did learn from Kant, and he does say that _if_ he were to speak as a critical idealist he would compare inner and outer history to practical and pure reason.[7] But he immediately criticizes Kantian idealism as blind to the social and historical factors in knowledge.[1] And what we have seen heretofore is that the point where Niebuhr departs from Kant is precisely where Kant restricts knowledge of God to inference from human values. Niebuhr departs from Kant in order to affirm knowledge about such independent realities as the way God acts in particular historical events. How God acts in relation to dinosaurs and Chinese is the sort of event that inner history as defined by Kant or individualistic existentialism can not handle; and it is the sort of event that inner history as defined by Niebuhr's social existentialism can and does handle.[2]

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[1] Frei, p. 90.

[2] _Meaning of Revelation_, p. 22. See above, pp. 70ff.

[3] _Ibid_., pp. 72-73.

[4] _Ibid_., p. 22. See above, pp. 70ff. and 90ff.

[5] _The Kingdom of God in America_, pp. 12-13; _Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 61-62.

[6] Frei, p. 90.

[7] _Meaning of Revelation_, p. 65.

This is exactly the one and only point where Frei misinterprets Niebuhr, if our analysis is correct. Frei's error is revealed when he continues by pointing again to Kant and asserting that Niebuhr's two kinds of history "are not really in methodological contact, so that we may speak here of a parallelism rather than interactionism in historical epistemology."[3] Yet the very passage that Frei refers to in The Meaning of Revelation defines four basic and necessary ways the two histories are interdependent and do interact.[4] We can begin to understand what is behind Frei's surprise at the dichotomy he sees in The Meaning of Revelation, when, as Frei himself observes, all of Niebuhr's other writings operate on the basis of a "unitive relation"

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1. Ibid.

2. Meaning of Revelation, pp. 86-88.

3. Frei, p. 90.

4. Meaning of Revelation, pp. 81-90.

rather than "a sharp dichotomy."[1] Behind Frei's surprise is the fact that the dichotomy he sees in The Meaning of Revelation does not exist. In The Meaning of Revelation, Niebuhr is advocating a unitive relation just as he does in his other writings.[2] Frei sees Niebuhr's existentialism as individualistic rather than social; and therefore he sees a dichotomy that is not there.

Frei's interpretation then leads him to suggest that Niebuhr excludes events in nature from revelation. "Revelation . . . can point at once to God and to history only if it refers to internal and not to external history. Otherwise, revelation becomes entangled once again in the specious claims to miraculous events in nature and naturalized history. . . ."[3] We must remember that Niebuhr does not define the difference between internal and external history in terms of two different kinds of events. Internal and external history deal with the same events; their difference is in the perspective from which they see the events.[4] It is not that internal history studies what happens in inward experience, while external history gives knowledge about events that are independent from the believer's inward experience. The nature of the revelatory moment in Niebuhr's social existentialism includes happenings external to the believer, and it includes knowledge about the way God acts in such happenings.

> Just because the Christian community remembers the revelatory moment in its own history it is required to regard all events,

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[1] Frei, pp. 30-31.

[2] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 83-84.

[3] Frei, p. 90.

[4] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 84ff.

> even though it can see most of them only from an external point of view, as workings of the God who reveals himself and so to trace with piety and disinterestedness, so far as its own fate is concerned, the ways of God in the lives of men. It is necessary for the Christian community, living in faith, to look upon all the events of time and to try to find in them the workings of one mind and will. This is necessary because the God who is found in inner history, or rather who reveals himself there, is not the spiritual life but universal God, the creator not only of the events through which he discloses himself but also of all other happenings. . . . Thus prophets, for whom the revelation of God was connected with his mighty acts in the deliverance of Israel from bondage, found the marks of that God's working in the histories of all the nations.[1]

The understanding of revelation that Niebuhr works out requires faith to regard all events as the workings of God, and to trace His workings in those events. The exclusion of any part of history is the mark of sin and error.[2]

Frei's Kierkegaardian interpretation leads him to the conclusion that Niebuhr is in danger of being forced into the dualistic epistemology of the early Barth. Such an epistemology can affirm only the "negative knowledge" that "we are existentially aware that we are being grasped by God." There is no content in revelation, no positive analogy by which to indicate the differentia of God's personhood.[3]

This means, of course, that there is no basis for a meaningful doctrine of providence. Frei indicates he believes Niebuhr to be in such danger by footnoting a climactic passage in The Meaning of Revelation.[4] Yet that very passage repeatedly affirms not only the awareness of being grasped but also the "self-disclosing of that eternal knower" who grasps us. The passage closes with an explicit indication of the positive analogy given us in Jesus Christ:

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[1] Ibid., pp. 86-87.

[2] Ibid., pp. 109-37.

[3] Frei, pp. 48-49 and 83-84.

[4] Frei, p. 84, n. 44: "Cf. The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 152ff."

> From this point forward we must listen for the remembered voice in all the sounds that assail our ears, and look for the remembered activity in all the actions of the world upon us. The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is now trusted and known as the contemporary God, revealing himself in every event; but we do not understand how we could trace his working in these happenings if he did not make himself known to us through the memory of Jesus Christ; nor do we know how we could be able to interpret all the words of God save by the aid of this Rosetta stone.[1]

Not only does Niebuhr indicate an analogy, but he argues that faith in the active faithfulness of God demands that we "must look for the remembered activity in all the actions of the world upon us."[2] Because we encounter an eternal Self not abstract and removed from particular action but acting in particular events, we have an indication of where and how to trace his action in all events. We have a memory of his action in Christ and so we know what kind of action he performs.[3] We know something about his interpersonal faithfulness, about the nature of his loyalty, and so we know something of how to recognize his faithful action elsewhere.[4] And because God is not merely a spiritual ideal but the universal ruler, faith "can and must look for the manifestation of the same self in all events."[5]

Niebuhr's social existentialism not only cuts through the impasse between a rigid propositional understanding of revelation on the one hand and a contentless subjective encounter on the other: it frees the understanding of faith, too, from profitless dichotomies. Faith is neither impersonal assent to doctrines nor subjective trust without content. There is a third element in faith. This third element is the living faithfulness of God, which is neither static and impersonal nor purely inward and subjective. Faith is a manifold interpersonal relation in which trust and loyalty have their place along with the faithfulness of the object of trust.[1] Niebuhr argues that "Bultmann's . . . strongly individualistic existentialism" leads him to dichotomize faith too sharply.[2] Against some Lutherans he contends that not only man's trust but also God's faithfulness is essential to the interpersonal faith relationship.[3] And this interpersonal understanding of faith has significance for the place of providence in Christian faith. Providence is part of God's faithfulness. Therefore providence is not merely dinosaurs and things external to faith; it is part of the existential faith relation. Hence tracing the faithful workings of God in all events is necessary. An understanding of something like providence is part of the response of faith to the Creator and sovereign Lord whose will and whose action, whose faithfulness and loyalty, are the source and content of faith.

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[1] Ibid., p. 154.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp. 89 and 120.

[4] Ibid., pp. 143 and 168.

[5] Ibid., pp. 86f.

This positive doctrine of providence, this tracing of the work-

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1. Niebuhr's whole essay, "On the Nature of Faith," is a highly important development of the implications of his perspective for the meaning of faith. See also "The Triad of Faith."

2. "On the Nature of Faith," p. 100.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

ings of God in contemporary happenings, is a major key to Niebuhr's ethics of response. It is the foundation for the normative aspect as well as for the situational aspect of response ethics. James Gustafson suggests that the starting point for Niebuhr's ethics is the question "'What is going on?' 'What is God doing?' It is not 'What should we do?'"[1] He quotes Niebuhr: "Responsibility affirms—God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."[2] And Gustafson comments: "For most of H. Richard Niebuhr's students such a statement is the most memorable theme in his course of lectures on Christian ethics. . . . It combines the indicative and imperative in a subtle and significant way."[3] Niebuhr's faith in the character of God's faithful action gives him the basic images for understanding what is going on, and it gives him the shape and general content of the response that we ought to make, the response that fits what is going on.[4] Niebuhr's understanding of the situation of responsibility is grounded on his faith in the sovereignty of God, and his criterion for all responsible action in all realms is that it be faithful to the action of the sovereign God. Here Gustafson puts Niebuhr in proper perspective:

> He had deep appreciation for Luther's affirmation that God is the Actor, and that man is more acted upon than acting. But, as chapter 5 of _Christ and Culture_ indicates, there

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[1] James Gustafson, "Introduction," in Niebuhr, _The Responsible Self_, p. 14.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 25 and 126. Cf. p. 167 _et passim_.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 25.

[4] _Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 91-109f.; _The Responsible Self_, pp. 164-67.

is too much duality in Luther's conception of God's relatedness to man and the world to permit Niebuhr to embrace Luther's view of "proper" and "alien" works of righteousness, of the "two realms," and of law and gospel. Niebuhr was religiously and theologically informed to the depths of his life and thought by affirmations of the divine sovereignty in the writings of Augustine, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards.[1]

There is more to be said for Niebuhr's understanding of revelation. But at least it is already clear that his social existentialism has some important implications for twentieth-century theological ethics. It provides an understanding of revelation that is theocentric and not subjectivistic or agnostic. And it does this within the limits of a critical understanding of historical relativism. It provides a basis for the recovery of a doctrine of providence, and for a theocentric ethics of response. It indicates grounds for independence from value theory, for a dynamic affirmation of the transcendence of God, and for the unity of inner and outer history. More work along these lines needs to be done. But Niebuhr has indicated the line of march.

So far we have concentrated on the question of man's knowledge of God's sovereignty within the limits of relativism. The answer to this question is a major part of the foundation for his ethics. But now we must turn to more specifically ethical questions. We must turn to the question of the Christian strategy for relating to a secular culture. We must ask how the sovereignty of God helps Niebuhr develop a strategy for attacking the problem of Christ and culture.

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1. Gustafson, "Introduction," p. 26.

PART TWO

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND THE RESPONSIBLE RELATION BETWEEN CHRIST AND CULTURE

CHAPTER V

CULTURE PROTESTANTISM AND MORAL IDEALISM

The problem of Christ and culture in Christian ethics seems to belong with the name H. Richard Niebuhr, just as the theory of relativity in physics belongs with the name Albert Einstein. Although Niebuhr did not invent the problem, he named it, brought it into full articulation, and created the typology for discussing it.[1]

His concern with the relation between Christ and culture began as a protest against what has come to be called "Culture Protestantism." He later described his concerns in the period between 1930 and 1935:

> As a convinced Protestant (not an anti-Catholic) who saw the sovereignty of God usurped by the spirit of capitalism and of nationalism I felt strongly that the times called for the rejection of "Culture Protestantism" and for the return of the church to the confession of its own peculiar faith and ethos.[2]

He identified Karl Barth as the leader of that protest and the inventor of the term, "Culture Protestantism."[1]

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[1] The name of the problem and the fivefold typology come, of course, from Niebuhr's book, Christ and Culture. But he spent a lifetime bringing the problem to awareness. Most of his articles treat some aspect of the problem. The preface or introduction that he wrote for each book from Social Sources (p. vii), The Church Against the World (pp. 1-13), and Kingdom of God in America (pp. ix-xii), to Meaning of Revelation (pp. vii-ix), Christ and Culture (pp. ix-x), and Radical Monotheism (pp. 11-16), states in one way or another that the book concerns the relation between Christ and culture.

[2] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

So Karl Barth and the protest against acculturated Christianity were instrumental in the development of Niebuhr's understanding of Christ and culture. How did Niebuhr's protest relate to his new awareness of the sovereignty of God? In what ways did the sovereignty of God help him relate Christ and culture? What did Karl Barth contribute?

The answer to these questions requires a careful look at two related themes in Niebuhr's thought. One theme is a semi-monastic reaction against the church's compromise with culture. Niebuhr soon saw the danger of this reaction in his own thought and in the church. The other theme is the moral idealism of liberal Christianity. These two themes form the background and define the problems Niebuhr had in mind as he worked out his transformationism and his contextualism. Therefore in this chapter we must examine Culture Protestantism and moral idealism as problems Niebuhr faced; in the three chapters then following we can explore his constructive solutions--transformationism and contextualism.

Appeal to the Power of the Christian Ideal

Niebuhr's first protests against Culture Protestantism were made in the name of liberalism, not the theology of crisis. Although he later led many of his contemporaries in pointing to the inadequacy of liberalism, he first saw the sickness of modern culture from the perspective of liberal moral idealism. Before he had shown any Barthian influence and well before Hitler's rise to power, Niebuhr indicted the racism, nationalism, capitalism, materialism, and undisciplined self-indulgence that he saw in the modern world.

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[1] Ibid., and Christ and Culture, pp. 84 and 94.

In "Back to Benedict?", his first widely-read article, Niebuhr calls for a new monasticism to oppose the comfortable compromise of modern life.[1] He argues for five ideals: other-worldliness, mysticism, chastity, poverty, and obedience; and he contrasts these ideals with the life that prevails in our culture. "Without something of the ascetic rule, extreme or gentle, we shall be hard put to it to discover in our modern life with its blatant advertising of material values any element of the brooding spirit."[2] Niebuhr makes the contrast so clear and the case so forceful that the argument is surprisingly persuasive. Given only the two alternatives of modernity or monastery, the sincerely ethical Christian has a difficult choice.

> In a time when a man cannot own a square foot of property or accept a salary without coming dangerously near to compromise with the whole evil and selfish system which issues in class and race exploitation and murder, the monastic ideal of poverty is not an unreasonable answer to the moral problem of property. . . . The monk who was willing to be robbed of his sole property--the breviary--and of his life, because he knew the first by heart and would gain the bliss of heaven through the loss of the latter, is more to be envied than the economically "free" man who trembles at each fluctuation of the market and at each new headline about Russian communism. The over-indulgence, not the under-satisfaction

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[1] "Back to Benedict?", pp. 860-61. His three previous articles were published in 1920, 1921, and 1922 in Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America; they were so little known that Raymond Morris did not include them until the 1964 revision of his "A Bibliography of H. Richard Niebuhr's Writings," Faith and Ethics, p. 295. They each speak from the perspective of the social gospel and moral idealism.

[2] "Back to Benedict?", p. 861.

of the instincts of acquisition makes man poor.[1]

This espousal of the Benedictine ideals has three noteworthy qualities. The first is its idealism. The article simply defines one ideal at a time, applies it to the world, and shows how the world falls short. The ideals stand out in their direct appeal. There are no attempts to water them down, no suggestions that they might work in our society if we only tried them. The ideals are selected neither because they are practical and prudent, nor because they represent the latest trend or emerging new consensus. They are chosen simply because they stand above us in their rightness.

The second significant quality in the article is its prophetic perceptiveness at such an early date. In this article, written in 1925, before Niebuhr had shown any interest in crisis theology, or indeed before crisis theology was much heard of, Niebuhr was attacking the Culture Protestantism and the economic and racial exploitation that later caused eruptions on both sides of the Atlantic. He sharpened his attack by unequivocally affirming ideals directly opposed to divisiveness and exploitation.

The third remarkable quality of the article is its espousal of a Christ-against-culture ethic—as Niebuhr later defined it.[2] The same idealism that strengthened Niebuhr's prophetic perceptiveness also weakened his will to remain in a world so far from perfect. When measured by strict monastic ideals, any culture is full of compromise and evil. In the midst of any culture, a life true to the

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Christ and Culture, pp. 45-82.

Christian ideals of St. Benedict is impossible. Because Niebuhr defined the ethical problem as a radical antithesis between ideal and real, the only alternatives seemed to be acceptance and accommodation on the one hand, or revulsion and retreat on the other. "Dualism is perhaps not so discredited a philosophical doctrine as the fashion in thought would have us believe; at all events a practical dualism is emerging out of the critical antithesis modern men experience between the ideal and the real."[1]

In adopting a Christ-against-culture position at that early stage of his pilgrimage of faith, Niebuhr intended not to withdraw but to confess that the true direction of cultural responsibility had been lost. He did not expect his readers to enter the monastery, but he did hope they would understand his profound despair about living as a Christian in the midst of modern culture. He did mean to cry out in anguish at the suffering of the sincere Christian torn between the ideal and the real. He was deliberately desperate and radical in his advocacy of monastic ideals because he was beginning to probe the problem of Christ and culture in a radical way.

Niebuhr's anguished protest, his moral idealism, and his retreat from culture are equally apparent in his first book, The Social Sources of Denominationalism.[2] It was published in 1929, before the sovereignty of God had begun to alter his understanding of Christian ethics. One need not read far to realize that its perspective is closer to Harnack than to Kierkegaard: the first sentence of the first chapter speaks of Jesus as a teacher of moral precepts, and as the founder of Christendom.[1] The first paragraph identifies love as the basic content of those precepts.[2] Christianity is understood in terms of sacrificing love,[3] the "Christian principle of brotherhood,"[4] and the "ideals of brotherhood."[5] The history of Christianity is the story of "unchangeable absolutes" that sometimes permeate culture but that are constantly compromised into a "relationship which the gospel denies and combats."[6] When Niebuhr identified his authorities for this description of the early Christian ethic, he referred to Adolf Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch.[7] He affirmed those ideals that were shared by Harnack and Troeltsch, and by much American Protestant liberalism in the early 1900's.[8]

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[1] "Back to Benedict?" pp. 860-61.

[2] (New York, 1929).

Niebuhr's idealism, however, was not sentimental or overly optimistic. On the contrary, his understanding of culture and of social institutions was realistic and sometimes pessimistic. He had learned realism from Troeltsch, Weber, Tawney, and others.[9] The term

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[1] Ibid., p. 3.

[2] Ibid.: Christendom's "founder had bidden it to permeate [civilization] with the spirit of divine love."

[3] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[4] Ibid., p. 6.

[5] Ibid., p. 8.

[6] Ibid., pp. 3-5.

[7] Ibid., p. 8, note 3.

[8] See, for example, Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, pp. 1004-06; and Adolf Harnack, What Is Christianity? (New York, 1904), pp. 55-84.

[9] Social Sources of Denominationalism, p. vii.

"idealism," applied to the early Niebuhr, means simply the characteristics we have already noticed: (1) the Christian ethic is defined in terms of values or moral precepts; (2) the precepts are affirmed not because they are practical or because they represent a comfortable consensus but because they are right and they are Christian; (3) the precepts are absolute and universal; (4) compromising them is evil; and (5) their content is primarily love, brotherhood and universality.

The vigor of Niebuhr's emphasis on the unchangeable absolutes of love and brotherhood led him to attack the evil of compromise. With a realistic note, he admitted that compromise is inevitable. That, however, "does not make it less an evil. The fault of every concession, of course, is that it is made too soon, before the ultimate resistance 'to the blood' has been offered."[1] But worse than simple compromise is the hypocrisy that accompanies it:

> But compromises are doubly evil when they are unacknowledged, when the emasculation of the Christian ideal remains undiscovered and when, in consequence, men take pride, as in an achievement, in a defeat of the essential gospel. Such unconscious hypocrisy not only bars the way to continued efforts to penetrate the stubborn stuff of life with the ethics of Jesus but is the author of further compromises made all too early.[2]

One major reason Niebuhr described the sources of denominationalism was to uncover all the hypocritical compromises he could find. He emphasized denominational divisions rather than uniting forces in order to show most clearly the sins that need confessing. His story of the churches became the drama of the defeat of Christian ideals by compromise with ever-conquering forces of social division.[3] The prophetic

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1. *Ibid*., p. 5.

2. *Ibid*., pp. 5-6.

3. *Ibid*., pp. 264-65, which is simply a summary of the basic theme of the previous nine chapters.

critique of the committed idealist almost becomes the pessimistic complaint of a cynic:

> Denominationalism in the Christian church is such an unacknowledged hypocrisy. It is a compromise, made far too lightly, between Christianity and the world. Yet it often regards itself as a Christian achievement and glorifies its martyrs as bearers of the cross. It represents the accommodation of Christianity to the caste-system of human society.[1]

In his drive to uncover hypocrisy, Niebuhr made "the orthodox interpretation of denominationalism" a major target. The orthodox interpretation hides hypocrisy by pointing to "the official creeds of the churches as containing the explanation of the sources and of the character of the prevailing [denominational] differences."[2] It uses theological differences to rationalize divisions that compromise Christian ideals, and to make those divisions look like matters of principle rather than unconfessed compromises of Christian principles.[3] The point of Social Sources of Denominationalism is that denominational divisions are understood and explained more adequately as accommodation to class divisions (chapters ii-iv), national divisions (v and viii), sectional divisions (vi and vii), and racial divisions (ix). Not loyalty to creeds, but accommodation to social divisions, explains denominations. For example, "The causes of the racial schism are not difficult to determine. Neither theology nor polity furnished the occasion for it. The sole source of this denominationalism is social; it demonstrates clearly the invasion of the church of Christ by the principle of caste."[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 6.

[2] Ibid., p. 12.

[3] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[4] Ibid., p. 259.

Just as the absoluteness of the ideals led Niebuhr to emphasize the compromise involved in denominationalism, the particular ethical content of the ideals led him to emphasize the divisiveness of the social forces. The ideals that he advocated are love, brotherhood, and reconciliation. The social forces that he described are those that disrupt love and brotherhood; they are the divisive forces of class, nation, section, and race. He knew there were social forces that could help unite and reconcile denominations, but he chose to emphasize those that are divisive.[1]

Six years before his brother's An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Richard Niebuhr was fighting for the transcendence of the gospel.[2] He proclaimed that the gospel is far removed from the churchly institutions and high-minded loyalties that too easily satisfy many Christians. The gospel is the moral precept of love-- and brotherhood, and unity.[3] And there is an almost infinite divergence between those ideals and institutional realities.

> The gospel's condemnation of divisiveness among men is one of its most characteristic and appealing elements. The spirit of Jesus revolted against Jewish class distinctions between the righteous few and the unhallowed many. He spoke to the outcast poor of the promise of the kingdom; he saw the typical child of God in a Samaritan who knew the meaning of human solidarity; ignoring the nationalism of Jews and Romans, he found faith superior to that of the chosen people in the heart of a centurion and sought his nation's glory in the role of a suffering servant.[4]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 270-72. Robert Lee has illustrated Niebuhr's decision by the intentional contrast of his The Social Sources of Church Unity (New York, 1960), pp. 7, 16-25, 28, et passim.

[2] Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Meridian edition (Cleveland, 1956), pp. 15-23, 27-29, 43, 97ff. The first edition was published in 1935.

[3] Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. 3ff., 278-79, et passim.

[4] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

In the light of his understanding of the spirit of Jesus, Niebuhr laid bare the conflict between economic institutions and gospel ideals:

> Modern Christianity has returned with great enthusiasm to the study of this spirit and of these ideals of brotherhood. It has professed to find in them the solution of the difficulties and dangers of modern social life. The inequality of privilege in the economic order appears to the church to contain a fundamental denial of the Christian principle of brotherhood and to be symptomatic of an unhealthful state of society because it is contrary to the divine law inherent in the process of life as well as explicit in the gospel of Jesus.[1]

Niebuhr criticized not only the inequality and alienation between economic classes, but also the distortion and irrelevance of a gospel captured and chained by the economic interests of lower, middle, and upper class denominations.[2]

Niebuhr's criticism of nationalism and racial division was unusually foresighted for 1929. It diagnosed exactly those evils that were to cause the major eruptions of the next generation.

> Nationalistic policies with their self-centered attitudes and their inevitable frictions, which culminate again and again in the bestiality of war--these also are subject to the church's strictures for all their cynical disregard of the Christian ethics and their appeal to the long-fostered sentiments of pride in one's own and contempt for another's national genius. The prejudice of racial caste-systems expressed on the one hand in the exclusion of Orientals from the privileges enjoyed by Occidental racial groups and in the social and political disabilities of the Negro, on the other hand in the fulsome praise of the superior qualities of Nordic tribes, seems no less contrary to the ideals of the Nazarene and to the spirit of the community he founded.[3]

Applied to the churches, such a prophetic viewpoint saw primarily the evil side.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-105, and especially 72-76, 104-05.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

> The division of the churches closely follows the division of men into the castes of national, racial, and economic groups. It draws the color line in the church of God; it fosters the misunderstandings, the self-exaltations, the hatreds of jingoistic nationalism by continuing in the body of Christ the spurious differences of provincial loyalties; it seats the rich and the poor apart at the table of the Lord, where the fortunate may enjoy the bounty they have provided, while the others feed upon the crusts their poverty affords.[1]

This is not a pretty picture. The real is the opposite of the ideal. The ruling power in the history of the churches has proved its mastery again and again. That ruling power is not the Christian ideal but the actual, the divisive, the social forces. Karl Marx is basically right: "Doctrines and practices change with the mutations of social structure, not vice versa; the ideological interpretation of such changes quite misses the point."[2]

Hypocrisy and divisive social forces: this is what Niebuhr saw as he looked at the church and the world from the perspective of his Christian ideals. On the one hand there is the church: it "began its career with the promise of peace and brotherhood for a distracted world," but in its denominationalism it "has accepted the divisions of the society it had hoped to transform and has championed the conflicts it had thought to transcend."[3] On the other hand there is the world:

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1. Ibid., p. 6.

2. Ibid., p. 21. Niebuhr always considered the Marxian extreme, which sees only economic causation, as a narrow oversimplification of causation by sociological forces. In The Kingdom of God in America, pp. 4-14, he rejected Marx in favor of a broader sociological interpretation that includes not only economic forces but also racial, nationalistic, group-defense, and other social forces. This broader sociological interpretation, he wrote, is correct and pertinent. It is still not adequate, however, to explain the whole of religious development, especially the prophetic and mystical elements.

3. Social Sources, p. 264.

> Modern civilization, aghast at the results of a conflict between societies which had acknowledged no higher ideal than the pride of an ignorant nationalism, looks forward fearfully and almost helplessly to a yet mightier conflagration of the hates and passions it has nurtured. Remembering the holocaust which ethical stupidity ignited and science fed with fuel, it fears to face its foreboding of a yet more fateful application of the destructive knowledge which its warriors are feverishly seeking. It envisions the prospect of death at its own hands. . . . And it knows that the way of divisive egotism is the way of doom. It regards the injustices of a class-organized economic social order, which apportions its rewards neither according to merit nor to need, but according to the power of the strong to take the spoils; it looks upon the maddening rush of an acquisitive society intent upon the gain of possessions and yet more possessions, irrespective of their cost in spiritual and moral values; it begins to tremble before the mastery of the machine it has invented. It sees the growing fears, suspicions, and hatreds of races long exploited by the nations of the West.[1]

The world, "in its saner moments," knows there is no hope "unless it is made captive to some compelling and integrating ideal which will restore it to a sense of the whole and will equip it with an ethics commensurate with the scope of its interests and of its world-embracing organization."[2] The world needs a synthesis of culture so its diverse groups can be "integrated into a harmonious, interacting society, serving one common end in diverse manners."[3] Such a synthesis can come only from a common ethics.[4] And that ethics, for Western civilization, must come from Christianity if it is to come at all.[5]

How can a divided and hypocritical Christian church "save the

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1. Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. 265-66.

2. Ibid., p. 266.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., pp. 266-69.

Western world?"[1] Is there any way to unity? Niebuhr devoted the last chapter of the book to the possibility of a constructive solution. He considered three possibilities. The first is that the social forces, which proved always victorious and almost omnipotent in Niebuhr's study of denominationalism, might themselves move the denominations toward union. But Niebuhr saw this as a false hope. Mere expedient accommodation to social forces can produce neither external union nor moral and ethical integration.[2]

The second possibility is offered by German crisis theology. When Niebuhr wrote _The Social Sources of Denominationalism_, he assessed the Barthian movement as an other-worldly retreat into an irresponsibility almost as pernicious as cultural accommodationism: "The other-worldly faith which regards the message of the gospel as applying to the individual's relation to a transcendental sphere alone and condemns every aspect of the present world . . . as the expression of a depraved and lost will, has been resurrected today by the crisis theology of Germany."[3]

What, then, is the third possibility? Where is the hope in a divided world? The hope is "the Christian ideal," which "wakes an answering response in many a human heart."[4] Niebuhr's solution was a straightforward presentation of the Christian ideal: "nothing less than the eternal harmony of love in which each individual can realize the full potentiality of an eternal life in self-sacrificing devotion to the Beloved Community of the Father and all the Brethren."[1] The church that proclaims this gospel will have no trace of nationalism. It will be characterized by "love of enemy and neighbor and the practice of non-resistance. . . . Distinctions between rich and poor will be abrogated by the kind of communism of love which prevailed in the early Jerusalem community." Such a church will "bridge the chasm between the races," both within itself and in all the relationships of life.[2] This was Niebuhr's hope, his third possibility.[3]

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[1] _Ibid_., p. 269.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 270-75.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 275. See also pp. 275-78.

[4] _Ibid_., p. 279.

In the same year that he published this appeal to the power of the Christian ideal, he also published an article with a radically different tenor.[4] "The suasion of a completely Christian ethics," he wrote, "is not strong enough to work." Therefore the only force likely to bring about union is the attraction of social affinity between people of similar economic and cultural class. The result will be "four or five significant churches" made up of those who are socially similar.[5] Niebuhr was rejecting the appeal to ideals as too weak. He was resigning himself to a secular ecumenicity that baptizes social divisions. He was falling back to the first possibility that he had discussed in the book, the uniting potential of the forces of social class whose power he had demonstrated. In the book, he had rejected this first possibility because it will cause more schisms than unions, more nationalism than universalism, and more accommodationism than loyalty to ideals.[1] He had concluded his evaluation of the uniting potential of the social forces in these words:

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 281.

[3] Ibid., pp. 278-84.

[4] Niebuhr, "Churches that Might Unite," Christian Century, XLVI (February 28, 1929), 259-61. I assume that the article was written later than the book, since a book takes longer to publish than a Christian Century article. In any case, the two rebut one another so directly that Niebuhr's internal struggle is graphically revealed.

[5] Ibid., p. 260.

> . . . a Christianity which surrenders its leadership to the social forces of national and economic life, offers no hope to the divided world. Lacking an integrating ethics, lacking a universal appeal, it continues to follow the fortunes of the world, gaining petty victories in a war it has long lost. From it the world can expect none of the prophetic guidance it requires in its search for synthesis.[2]

Yet now, in his article, Niebuhr was abandoning the appeal of Christian ideals and surrendering the leadership of the church to the social forces he had condemned. What had happened? What had caused him to give up his hope in Christian ideals?

Niebuhr had discovered several major weaknesses in the type of ethics that centers in moral ideals. Therefore he abandoned moral idealism and began developing a constructive alternative that would overcome those weaknesses. To understand his constructive alternative, we need to understand the errors he was trying to correct.

Impotence against Social Forces

The first inadequacy Niebuhr saw in idealism was its impotence

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1. Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. 271 and 274-75.
2. Ibid., p. 275.

against social forces, its inability to redirect the course of human decision. It "is not strong enough to work."[1] To propose high ideals as the solution for a major problem like denominationalism is to trust a weak deliverer in the face of a strong and stubborn foe. It is to trust the good will of men who will apply those ideals consistently and successfully, and the story of denominationalism indicates that such trust is a false one. The main point of Niebuhr's book, as we have seen, is that denominationalism is explained by social forces and not by creeds or beliefs. The beliefs, the ideals, always seem to give way before the force of social pressure, expediency, and compromise. No sooner had he written the book than he had rejected his own appeal to ideals.[2] And seven years later he commented on the solution he had proposed: "The only answer I was able to give to the problem of Christian disunity was in the form of a new appeal to good will to overcome stubborn social divisions and to incarnate the ideal of Jesus. This appeal seemed, upon critical reflection, to be wholly inadequate."[3]

On one of those rare occasions when the two brothers referred to one another in print, Reinhold testified to the problem that Richard was working on at the time, and to the influence that Richard's thought was having on him. In March, 1932, Reinhold wrote of his brother:

> I believe the problem on which he is working--the problem of dissociating a rigorous gospel ethic of disinterestedness and love from the sentimental dilutions of that ethic which are current in liberal Christianity--is a tremendously important

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[1] "Churches That Might Unite," p. 260.

[2] See above, p. 125.

[3] The Kingdom of God in America, p. x.

> one. I owe so much to the penetrating thought which he has been giving this subject that I may be able to do some justice to his general position even though I do not share his conviction that a pure love ethic can ever be made the basis of a civilization.[1]

Richard by then had already moved beyond a pure love ethic to an eschatological ethic based on the sovereignty of God.[2] His "tower experience," his profound reorientation of faith, had just occurred, and his brother may not yet have understood it fully. But Reinhold's statement does agree with what we have seen to be the problem his brother was wrestling with. Richard wanted to affirm the rigor of the gospel ethic, and he saw the liberal statement of that ethic as a sentimental dilution. It was sentimental in its naive trust that man's good will, freely pursuing high ideals, can conquer the stubborn reality of social forces.

Captivity to Ideologies

Man's will is impotent to deliver him out of his real problems because it is in ideological bondage. The church member who shares the usual class, national, and racial outlooks of his fellow church members may be a relatively good man in a moral sense, but he is still in bondage to the loyalties that cause social divisions. The church that trusts good will to deliver it from its divisiveness is therefore a captive of its culture. "Moralism which makes the human free will the source of all good and evil cannot understand this impotence. Its saviour is the will; every problem is solved by an appeal to the will. But there is no such thing as a free will in this sense."[1] To trust high ideals and human good will to deliver us from our bondage is to trust the same "saviour" that has surrendered the church to denominationalism. Such trust is idolatry. It is trust in man rather than God, and thus it becomes bound to the corrupt civilization that shapes and conditions man. In 1936, Niebuhr criticized the Social Gospel: "God, in this theory, becomes a means to an end; he is there for the sake of achieving a human ideal and he does not do even this directly, but only through the inspiration which he offers to those who worship him."[2]

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?" The Christian Century, XLIX (March 30, 1932), 415.

[2] H. R. Niebuhr, "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," The Christian Century, XLIX (April 6, 1932), 447.

Many years later, in The Responsible Self, Niebuhr pointed out similar problems in the teleological approach to Christian ethics. Teleological ethics concentrates on goals or ideals, and pictures man as the shaper of reality to fit ideals. Teleological ethics, in other words, is the general type of ethic to which Niebuhr's early idealism belonged.[3] His last criticism of this type of ethic was consistent with his criticism in the early thirties: "The theory of teleology, whether Christian or non-Christian, always directs attention to the primacy of the human pursuit of the ideal good. But it remains most difficult to reconcile this with the Christian conviction and experience of the primacy of God's action . . ."[1]

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[1] H. R. Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," Journal of Religion, XV (July, 1935), 279.

[2] H. R. Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," Religion in Life, V (Spring, 1936), 180.

[3] The Responsible Self, p. 49.

In a fashion similar to Karl Barth and others, Niebuhr was criticizing ethical idealism for being too anthropocentric.[2] Man, in that ethic, is the maker, the doer, the striver. God is relegated to the relatively inactive status of a goal or object of man's striving. Niebuhr identified the idolatry of anthropocentrism as the chief enemy of the church's freedom for prophetic relevance. Capitalism and nationalism, he pointed out, are variant forms of anthropocentrism. And these three idolatrous faiths are the cultural forces to which the church, in its accommodating compromises, has become captive.[3] Niebuhr was not saying that American liberal Christianity proclaimed the sovereignty of man.[4] What he was saying was that such liberalism did not challenge the anthropocentrism of modern culture directly enough. By defining both the kingdom of God and the Christian ethic in terms of ideals, it was relying on men who pursue those ideals to effect the coming of the kingdom. In this sense it was allowing the church to become captive to human self-confidence, to the self-confidence of Western men who were nationalistic and capitalistic and confident of the good will of their own race and class of men.

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[1] *Ibid*., pp. 134-35.

[2] Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth* (London, 1962), pp. 33ff.; Will Herberg, "Introduction--The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth," *Community, State, and Church*, by Karl Barth (Garden City, 1960); and the following works by Karl Barth: *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, 1933), pp. 49-64 *et passim*; *Theological Existence To-day!* (London, 1933), pp. 48-54, 70, and 82; *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh, 1936), pp. ix-x and 217ff.; *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, 1960), pp. 21ff. and 37-42.

[3] *Church Against the World*, pp. 128-39.

[4] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248.

Dualism and Irrelevance

The third inadequacy of idealistic Christian ethics is its divorce of ethical norms from concrete situations. The result of the divorce is a dualism that limits ethics to a spiritual realm and leaves the rest of life untamed. Ideals, Niebuhr said, "always seem irrelevant to our situation and betray us into a dualistic morality."[1]

The irrelevance and the dualism result from moral idealism for several reasons. First, high ideals do not rule in the actual world. Idealism bifurcates being and value.[2] But if Christian ethics is based on ideals, it must try to relate the ideals to the world. One temptation is to lower the ideal so that it condones the world's actions, and to idealize the world so it can hide its hypocrisy. This is the alternative of Culture Protestantism that Niebuhr reacted against.

The other temptation is to emphasize the transcendence of the ideals and use them to show how evil the actual world is. The result is a Christ-against-culture position that condemns culture and lets it go its own way. We have seen that Niebuhr emphasized the anti-Christian side of the institutional church and that he came close to pessimism, cynicism, and the urge to withdraw. This is why D. W. Soper saw The Social Sources of Denominationalism as a book of despair: "His first book . . . offers more despair than hope; it describes in sad detail the evangelical dismemberment of the body of Christ. . . . It presents a blow-by-blow account of the scourging of Christ by culture."[1]

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[1] "The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," p. 447.

[2] "The Center of Value," pp. 106-07.

Niebuhr's awareness of the dangers of pessimistic overreaction against cultural accommodationism is revealed in his article on "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist."[2] He condemns both communism and capitalism because they are alike anti-religious, secular, hedonistic, and completely removed from the ethics of love. The whole article, except the last sentence, is a call for Christianity to break its alliance with an evil culture. But the last sentence shifts directions so rapidly the impact is almost lost: "Then also the great temptation of faith will return--the temptation to find a resting place for its homelessness in some heaven of anticipated attainment where it can 'let the rest of the world go by.'"[3] The danger of the idealist is his temptation to find some place where ideals have hope of being realized and to neglect the rest of the world. This danger is a recurrent theme in Niebuhr's writings.[4] Because ideals do not rule pessimism, cynicism, and the urge to withdraw. This is why D. W. Soper saw The Social Sources of Denominationalism as a book of despair: "His first book . . . offers more despair than hope; it describes in sad detail the evangelical dismemberment of the body of Christ. . . . It presents a blow-by-blow account of the scourging of Christ by culture."[1]

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[1] David W. Soper, Major Voices in American Theology: Six Contemporary Leaders (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 157.

[2] The Christian Century, XLVII (October 29, 1930), 1306-07.

[3] Ibid., p. 1307.

[4] See, for example, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," The Gospel, the Church, and the World, edited by K. S. Latourette (New York, 1946), pp. 124-26; and Christ and Culture, pp. 68-73ff.

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[1] David W. Soper, Major Voices in American Theology: Six Contemporary Leaders (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 157.

[2] The Christian Century, XLVII (October 29, 1930), 1306-07.

[3] Ibid., p. 1307.

[4] See, for example, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," The Gospel, the Church, and the World, edited by K. S. Latourette (New York, 1946), pp. 124-26; and Christ and Culture, pp. 68-73ff.

A second cause of the irrelevance and dualism that results from an ethic of moral ideals is the individualistic character of that ethic. It seems to be divorced from the social aspects of reality. By contrast with liberal idealism, Niebuhr says, the exponents of neo-Protestantism as well as neo-Catholicism "may claim with considerable right that their return to 16th- and 13th-century modes of thought is due precisely to the necessity of overcoming the individualism of the more recent past."[1] Niebuhr has here reversed his first impression of the theology of crisis. Compared with many Social Gospel advocates, the neo-Protestants "have a far more social conception of the Church." Furthermore, "their orthodox conceptions of original sin, of historic revelation, of general judgment, and of the salvation of mankind . . . have direct relevance to men's existence as members of mankind and its societies."[2] Idealism trusts the good will of men to pursue high ideals, which is a relatively individual matter. The orthodox doctrines of sin and of the salvation of mankind suggest a bit less trust in the good will of men and a greater reliance on the action of God in historical events like the Exodus and in social institutions like Israel and Assyria.

In The Responsible Self, Niebuhr analyzes the idealistic formulation of ethics to show that its individualistic tendencies are not accidental but inherent. "There seems to be something rather

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1. "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," p. 178.

2. Ibid., p. 179.

individualistic about that conception of the self as agent which is connected with the image of man-the-maker."[1] It is true, he says, that the idealist can seek to make society, as well as himself, fit his ideal. Yet the idealist understands himself "as existing primarily in relation to ideas and ideals." He defines himself "as rational, living in the symbiosis of reason with its objects, be they Platonic ideas, Aristotelian entelechies, scientific theories, or common-sense facts."[2]

> If I define myself by my relation to ideals, I decide, as it were, in this self-definition that I will undertake to bring everything else within me—affective and emotive, unconscious as well as conscious reactions to other beings—into relation to my rational life, that is, to my existence in the presence of ideas or patterns or universals. In this situation I acknowledge a relation to other rational beings but my connection with them is a function of my relation to the objects of reason. First I know the objects of reason and only secondarily do I acknowledge other knowers. I may even raise the question of my ability to know other minds at all. I have a relation to their idea-content but no direct relation to the personal activity directed toward such ideas or to me as knower.
>
> As practical agent actualizing ideas in human existence, man-the-maker can measure his achievement by comparison with the idea; he can judge the shortcomings or the successes of his endeavors; but unless he introduces an element for which his idea of himself makes no real room, he cannot speak of accountability for success or failure. Usually he does introduce some such notion of response to him and his work by other selves, but it seems to represent a surd in his thinking.[3]

The nonhistorical character of ideals is a third cause of irrelevance and dualism. Ideals, in their universality and absoluteness, seem to be divorced from historical actualities, actualities that change with time and place and with the drama of all that is living. We have already examined this aspect of idealism in our discussion of Troeltsch and the problem of historical relativism.[1] Therefore we can simply summarize the matter in Niebuhr's own words:

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 69.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 70.

> The recognition that the I, this acting self, is a timefull and historical being does not seem to be of first importance in those ways of thinking about our activity which employ the archetypal figures of man-the-maker. . . . Man-the-maker does indeed reckon on the span of future time available to him for the actualization of what is potential in his material. . . . There are five-year teleologists and teleologists of infinite progress. Thus man's time as future does enter into the practical assessment of potentiality and into the definition of the ideal by those who see him as man-the-maker. But of the critical present they seem hardly aware and the past seems to be of little moment in this way of thinking about our action.[2]

A fourth way that idealism leads to irresponsible dualism is its tendency to separate everything into the good and the bad, and to ignore the inevitable complexities and ambiguities of existence. In 1933, when Niebuhr was studying the struggle of the Confessing Church against German National Socialism, he wrote a passionate plea for dispassionate analysis of complex social forces. Liberal Christianity's moralistic and idealistic opposition to all German nationalism prior to Hitler shares much of the blame for driving the force of nationalism into Hitler's camp.

> Among the major reasons for the frequent failures of Christian churches and socialist parties in their social conflicts is their over-simplified analysis of the strategic situation. The orthodox interpretations of life as a battle between religion and secularism, idealism and materialism, or the equally orthodox view of it as wholly determined by the class struggle both leave out of account the fact that there are social forces which are probably quite as important as religious or class loyalties and which may become allies or foes in the religious or class struggle.[3]

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[1] See chapter i, above.

[2] The Responsible Self, pp. 90-91.

[3] "Nationalism, Socialism, and Christianity," p. 469.

Niebuhr is here basically a "situationalist" or "contextualist"; his main ethical strategy is to attack moral idealism and to advocate careful analysis of the strategic situation.[1] This is in 1933. Thus his situational ethic emerges in his writings at the same time that the sovereignty of God does. And both of these themes emerge in response to the crisis of National Socialism in Germany.

Niebuhr describes "the attempt of religious idealists to understand political and economic conflicts in terms of ideals" as similar to a doctor who treats all illnesses as merely psychological; it is "likely to be not only fanatical but also highly dangerous."[2] He says that "where this moralism begins analysis stops," and that when idealists oppose one another "they simplify each other in the same way and ascribe what does not fit into the simple scheme to ethical perversity."[3] Once more we recognize the prophetic anguish of the author of "Back to Benedict?", but this time it is the anguish of a situationalist who has definitely and decisively rejected moral idealism:

> German Protestant Christianity today finds itself in extremely uncomfortable alliance with an un-Christian nationalism partly because it had no confidence in itself as an independent power and hence did not develop its independence and seek to direct nationalism, partly because doctrinaire socialism did not realize that there were any other forces in the world save economic interests and drove religious loyalty into the arms of patriotism and capitalism. This last statement may suffice to illustrate another phase of this maladept strategy of the moralists who think

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[1] The task of defining Niebuhr's contextualism will have to wait until chap. viii. But a preliminary explanation should be entered here: Niebuhr never proposed to do away with norms and guidelines; what he wanted was norms that are grounded in the sovereignty of God and in the concrete context.

[2] "Nationalism, Socialism, and Christianity," p. 469.

[3] Ibid.

> in terms of good and bad men or movements only, but who, of course, always identify themselves with the good men and movements.[1]

In Niebuhr's discussion of the idealistic simplicism that divides everything into the good and the bad, we begin to see why idealism tends to fall into either a Christ-of-culture or a Christ-against-culture position; and we see why both of those positions are often irresponsible in their relation to secular culture. The Christ-against-culture ethic divides the world into the good and the bad, calls the culture bad, and withdraws from cultural responsibility. The accommodationist also divides the world into the good and the bad, but he identifies the good with some cultural movement and uncritically accepts that movement as ethically normative. Such identification can have consequences more dangerous than withdrawal.

> It is not always understood by the American section of the Christian revolt that a considerable section of the so-called German Christian movement, in which the confusion of gospel and nationalism prevails, had sources in just such a reaction as its own against an individualistic, profit-loving and capitalistic civilization. There are many social idealists among these Germanizers of the gospel; and their fervor is essentially like that of the other idealists who equate the kingdom of God with a proletarian socialist instead of a national socialist society.[2]

In sum, we have seen four ways in which moral idealism tends to separate the world into a spiritual realm and an evil realm, and to lose its power to transform the secular world. Ideals do not rule in the actual world; at best they are partly realized upon occasion in a few places. How shall the moral idealist be responsible in his relation to all the other occasions and places that are governed by forces independent from ideals? Ideals are individualistic; they rely on the man of good will to shape life according to principles. How shall the moral idealist overcome the tendency to rely on the will of the individual and to leave social forces untamed? Idealism emphasizes the eternal, the future, or the hoped-for; it de-emphasizes the past and the present. How shall the ethics of moral idealism be fully responsible toward historical forces, toward the changing and the less-than-hoped-for? Idealism tends to separate everything into the good and the bad; it oversimplifies complex social forces. How shall it overcome this tendency and turn to careful analysis of the strategic situations where actual decisions are made?

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 470.

[2] *Church Against the World*, p. 144.

This separation of the world into a spiritual realm and an evil realm is an aspect of the Christ-and-culture problem. When Niebuhr raised these questions about the ethics of moral idealism, he was beginning to raise the issues that led to his book, Christ and Culture. He was saying that Christian ethics built along the lines of moral idealism tends toward dualism. The ethic of moral idealism inherently tends to divide the world into two realms separated by a wide chasm. It is hard for the Christian to straddle that chasm without falling into irrelevance and irresponsibility.

In these criticisms of idealism, we see more than Niebuhr's general concern about the relation between Christ and culture; we see the emergence of what he later called transformationism. He was looking for a formulation of the Christian ethic that would neither identify Christianity with a cultural movement like socialism nor retreat from cultural responsibility as monasticism did. He was looking for the independence of the church from captivity to nationalsim and to class and racial barriers; and he was also looking for aggressive invasion of culture by a transformed and transforming church.[1]

Niebuhr had found that the monastic other-worldliness of "Back to Benedict?" and the despairing dualism of The Social Sources of Denominationalism were brothers. They were both fathered by an understanding of the gospel in terms of pure and transcendent ideals. They both inherited a tendency to think in terms of two realms, one ethical and the other alien to ethics. They both were weak in maintaining an independent but transforming relation to culture.

Niebuhr diagnosed one of the major problems of modern society as

> the tendency of modern men to live and act in a series of moral spheres that are not connected with each other. When in 1929 Walter Lippmann pointed to the situation in his Preface to Morals he described the movements of secession that had broken up the republic of human action into a series of independent states. Wealth was pursued in one for wealth's sake, art in another for art's sake, truth in a third for truth's sake. Since then the situation has not changed for the better, save insofar as the imposition of national morality, for which all other ends are subordinated to national survival and glory, may be regarded as an improvement.[2]

One of the evils of the compartmentalization of morality into separated spheres is its tendency to remove restraints from nationalistic power and other similar expressions of force. Niebuhr was disturbed about "the tendency among us to abandon large areas of our human existence to the sway of power, emotion, psychological drives, or pure force of one kind or another."[1] He wrote of this tendency as

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[1] Ibid., p. 154; and "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," p. 48.

[2] Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 137. Niebuhr's discussion of henotheism in relation to nationalism makes it clear that he was hardly happy with the "improvement" that national morality offered in reconciling the moral spheres. See ibid., pp. 24ff. and 68ff.

> a general movement in modern morality that confines the work of reason—that is the work of seeking proportion, coherence, and law—to our activity as knowers while it regards our other activities—from sex to politics—as really outside our rational control. Judgments about true and false, about right and wrong, can be passed it is thought on the consequences of scientific action. But all other action is really beyond the sphere of such judgment and regarded as subject to chance or blind play or blind forces.[2]

In other words he saw compartmentalization as a prime source of modern evils. Insofar as idealism tended toward dualism or compartmentalization between Christ and culture, he judged idealism inadequate.

We began this discussion of the inadequacies of moral idealism by examining two criticisms of idealism: that it is too weak to redirect the course of human decision, and that it is in bondage to man's ideologies. These two inadequacies point to the need for a responsible transformationism as directly as does the tendency toward dualism. The weakness of idealism is its inability to transform culture aggressively; and its bondage is an anthropocentric idolatry that surrenders to culture. Waldo Beach makes both points concisely in a discussion of race relations:

> One of the contributions of Richard Niebuhr to Protestant thinking has been in pointing up the inadequacy of such moralism. This . . . view was in some ways as typical of the later social gospel proponents of Protestantism as it is of secular humanitarians. By the nature of its diagnosis it fails to provide the corrective dynamic for conversion from prejudiced to nonprejudiced behavior. If the issue were merely one of an acknowledged distance between an equality professed and an inequality practiced, then increased moral gumption should be sufficient to close the gap. But the Pauline contradiction of knowing better and doing worse is not so readily overcome. It is not just negative inertia and caution which lie behind racial discrimination, but the positive counter-

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1. Ibid., p. 138.

2. Ibid., pp. 138-39.

> faiths which produce them. The "conflicting valuations" turn out to be a warfare of the gods in the soul of man. Ultimately the racial problem is not one of hypocrisy but of idolatry, not of cultural lag but of conflicting faiths.[1]

Because moral idealism trusts man's good will too much and corrects his idolatry too little, it fails to provide the corrective dynamic for the conversion of culture.

Loss of Historical Roots

One final inadequacy that Niebuhr saw in moral idealism is also directly related to his concern for the transformation of culture. Idealism has weakened Christian ethics by severing it from its roots in the historic tradition that provides its independent force and its transforming energy. Niebuhr's "reaction against liberalism meant reaction against its rejection of the social past; its suspicion of tradition; its super-Protestantism in not only passing over the whole medieval period but also the period of the Reformation itself."[2] He said that when idealism tried to interpret Biblical ethics, it had to distort or ignore much that is basic, including eschatology.[3] Liberal idealism, therefore, has severed Christian ethics from the Biblical tradition, the medieval tradition, the Reformation, and from the American Christian tradition as well.

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[1] Waldo Beach, "A Theological Analysis of Race Relations," Faith and Ethics, p. 208.

[2] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

[3] The Responsible Self, pp. 65-67, 131-35, and 166-70.

Niebuhr said that he turned to the study of historic American Christianity in order to discover the source of strength that provided both independence from culture and power to transform culture. Adolf Keller and others suggested he might find that strength in the ideal of the kingdom of God, the hopeful expectation that the Christian ideal could be realized on earth:

> This expectation might be the hard, unyielding core which kept religion from becoming a mere function of culture; which enabled it to recover its initiative, to protest as well as to acquiesce, to construct new orders of life as well as to sanctify established orders; which accounted for its reformist activities, explained its relations to the democratic, antislavery and socialist movements, and its creativity in producing ever new religious groups.[1]

But the kingdom of God, interpreted as an ideal, did not provide the clue for understanding the force of American Christianity. The "Puritans, Quakers, and the great leaders and movements of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" were not pursuing an ideal so much as they were responding to a push from behind. "In them a *vis a tergo* rather than the attraction of an ideal seemed to be the moving force."[2] With this insight, this observation of the force that was moving men and transforming culture, Niebuhr began to discover his solution for the problems he had seen in moral idealism.

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[1] *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. xi. See also p. x.

[2] *Ibid*., p. xi.

CHAPTER VI

RESPONSIBILITY IN THE DIVINE "NOW":

THE POWER TO TRANSFORM ALL THINGS

> For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them. He lives somewhat less "between the times" and somewhat more in the divine "Now" than do his brother Christians. . . . The conversionist, with his view of history as the present encounter with God in Christ, does not live so much in expectation of a final ending of the world of creation and culture as in awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself.[1]

In Christ and Culture, Niebuhr presents his systematic description of what he calls conversionism or transformationism.[2] Three essential principles of transformationism are: (1) the corruption of all culture, (2) "the power of the Lord to transform" all culture, and (3) the recognizability of the transformation now, in present events, because the pattern of God's transforming action has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

First, transformationists "discern how all cultural work in which men promote their own glory, whether individualistically or socially, whether as members of the nation or of humanity, lies under the judgment of God."[3] Transformationists, in other words, are far

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1. Christ and Culture, p. 66.
2. Ibid., chap. vi.
3. Ibid., p. 191.

removed from Culture Protestantism. All culture, all that is human, whether individual or social, private or public, religious or political, personal or official, is good but is corrupted, pervaded by sin.

"Yet they believe also that such culture is under God's sovereign rule, and that the Christian must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord."[1] Therefore transformationists are as far from the irrelevance of idealistic dualism as they are from the cheap relevance of accommodationism. All culture is in the realm of God's sovereign rule. No aspect of culture has some other Lord than the one Lord, God in Christ. In all areas of the world at all times the Christian is responsible to that one, universal Lord.

Finally, transformationists see the pattern of the present transformation as the pattern of God's grace demonstrated in Christ. They see this transformation not merely as promise and demand for the future but as action already in process. They see Christ more as Redeemer and Revealer in whom men discern and encounter God's way of reconciling than as ideal man or giver of a new law.[2]

> He heals the most stubborn and virulent human disease, the phthisis of the spirit, the sickness unto death; he forgives the most hidden and proliferous sin, the distrust, lovelessness, and hopelessness of man in his relation to God. And this he does not simply by offering ideas, counsel, and laws; but by living with men in great humility, enduring death for their sakes, and rising again from the grave in a demonstration of God's grace rather than an argument about it.[3]

When this description of transformationism is seen against the background of Niebuhr's critique of moral idealism and his understanding of the sovereignty of God, two observations are immediately obvious. First, all three principles of transformationism are precisely what Niebuhr was searching for to overcome the inadequacies of moral idealism. Second, the three principles that are the basis of transformationism are the same three principles of the sovereignty of God that we encounter repeatedly at the foundations of his thought.[1] This is no accident. It suggests that the sovereignty of God is the basis for Niebuhr's transformationism, and the basis for his alternative to moral idealism.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 190.

[3] Ibid., p. 191.

In The Responsible Self, Niebuhr presents his most systematic statement of the theme of responsible selfhood. Each of the above observations that applies to transformationism applies equally to his definition of responsible Christian selfhood. The same three principles, and the same emphasis on the actions of God, are essential to Niebuhr's definition of Christian responsibility. First, the universality of God's rule: "If, then, we try to summarize the ethos of Jesus in a formula we may do so by saying that he interprets all actions upon him as signs of the divine action."[2] "The Christian ethos so uniquely exemplified in Christ himself is an ethics of universal responsibility."[3] Second, God's independence: "The destructive intentions of Assyria are one thing; the holy, saving intentions of God are another. The meet, the fitting response of Israel, must be to the infinite intention in the first place, to the finite intention only secondarily."[1] Third, the pattern revealed in Jesus Christ:

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[1] Cf. chap. ii above.

[2] The Responsible Self, p. 167.

[3] Ibid.

> That this aspiration and hope has happened in human history is for the Christian inseparably connected with Jesus Christ. . . . When he feels and knows himself to be a son of God, an heir in the universe, at home in the world, he knows this sonship, this at-homeness, as not only like Jesus Christ's but as actualized by him.[2]

The conclusion is obvious: responsible selfhood, the sovereignty of God, and transformationism all belong together.

Static Sovereignty as Denial of Human Responsibility

But at this point a major problem arises. Thomas J. J. Altizer understands the meaning of the sovereignty of God as pure transcendence in a Scholastic-Aristotelian sense. "When Christian Scholasticism followed Aristotle in defining God as pure actuality or _actus purus_, it wholly isolated God from the world, knowing him as inactive and impassive, the God who is aseitic, or self-derived . . . ."[3] Therefore the sovereignty of God is a rejection of the world, of all things temporal, of humanity, and of human responsibility.[4] The sovereignty of God and human responsibility definitely do not belong together, as Altizer sees them. They are enemies to the death. Either God must die or man will die. The basic drive behind Altizer's theology is opposition to this inactive and distant God. As he himself says, "The 'atheism' of the radical Christian is in large measure a prophetic reaction to a distant and nonredemptive God who by virtue of his very sovereignty and transcendence stands wholly apart from the forward movement and the historical presence of the Incarnate Word."[1] Altizer maintains that this aloof and impassive understanding of sovereignty dominates the whole tradition of Christian theology, including contemporary Protestant theology. Therefore all tradition, all history, and all contemporary theology must be totally rejected in favor of a new apocalyptic-mystical era of the spirit.[2] This is a severe attack on Niebuhr's attempt to take history and the sovereignty of God seriously. It raises a major question: Do the sovereignty of God, human responsibility, and the Christian transformation of culture really belong together in the actuality of life?

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[1] _Ibid_., p. 196.

[2] _Ibid_., p. 176.

[3] Thomas J. J. Altizer, _The Gospel of Christian Atheism_ (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 62.

[4] _Ibid_., p. 127.

Niebuhr faced this question directly and explicitly. He had to face it for three reasons. First, Niebuhr discovered his answer to the weaknesses of moral idealism by rejoining a tradition that almost forced him to confront the question, before Altizer had thought of it. One of the weaknesses of moral idealism was its loss of connection with the main stream of historical Christianity. It had lost its roots, and it no longer had the strength that comes from historical continuity. It no longer had the coordinated strategy and the ability to communicate that come from a shared memory and a common tradition. Niebuhr rejoined the main stream of Christianity by turning to the early Puritans, along with their forerunners in the Protestant Reformation and their reinterpreters in the Great Awakening and in the Social Gospel. In this "Great Tradition of the American Churches,"[1] whose central theme was the sovereignty of God, he found more than a particular doctrinal system. He found the living faith in the sovereign God that was basic to the prophets, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the early Puritans, and Jonathan Edwards. Whether the label for this stream of Christianity is sometimes the Great Tradition or Puritanism, the classical Christian tradition or Neo-Protestantism, the prophetic strain or sometimes simply evangelicalism or Calvinism, Niebuhr always intends more than the exclusive and distinctive battle-cry of one theologian, past or contemporary. But at any rate, Niebuhr recovered an ethic of prophetic responsibility by rediscovering, reinterpreting, and rejoining the tradition of the sovereignty of God that runs through the early Puritans and Jonathan Edwards.

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[1] Ibid., p. 62.

[2] Ibid., p. 74 et passim.

But in the 1930's, when Niebuhr published _The Kingdom of God in America_ as his reinterpretation of this tradition, the Puritans were remembered as "puritanical." Jonathan Edwards was known—if he was known at all—as the author of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."[2] To resurrect this tradition required a masterful and pioneering reinterpretation, several years of research and creative rethinking, and a direct facing of the question of the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The reputation of the tradition Niebuhr recovered was enough to require him to take Altizer's question seriously before its time.

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[1] The phrase is from the title of Winthrop Hudson's _The Great Tradition of the American Churches_ (New York, 1953), which is greatly influenced both in basic theme and particular development by _The Kingdom of God in America_. See _The Great Tradition_, especially p. 13, pp. 148ff., and chap. iii _in toto_. Niebuhr uses the phrase, "The Great Tradition," and especially singles out Calvin and Jonathan Edwards in "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

[2] Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," pp. 214-15.

Second, Niebuhr's aim in restudying American Christianity was not to recover tradition *per se*, but to recover creative responsibility and active transformation. He was looking for

> the hard, unyielding core which kept religion from becoming a mere function of culture; which enabled it to recover its initiative, to protest as well as to acquiesce, to construct new orders of life as well as to sanctify established orders; which accounted for its reformist activities, explained its relations to the democratic, antislavery and socialist movements, and its creativity in producing ever new religious groups.[1]

Niebuhr was looking for the kind of faith that produces aggressive and responsible human initiative. Therefore at the very center of his endeavor he had to ask whether the sovereignty of God or particular understandings of the sovereignty of God do or do not fit with human responsibility.

Third, Niebuhr explicitly described the crucial importance of Henri Bergson in his recovery of the prophetic tradition. He had been profoundly influenced by Bergson's distinction between defensive, conservative, static religion, and the more open, creative, mystical spirit. Niebuhr redefined the open and creative type as more prophetic than mystical. He redefined it because of the historical evidence in American Christianity and because of his own concern for active transformationism rather than private, subjective religion. But it was with the distinction between static and creative religion in mind that he restudied American Christianity and wrote The Kingdom of God in America. He explicitly described how Bergson helped him face and overcome the question that we can now recognize as central for Altizer.[1] One of the results was a dynamic rather than a static understanding of the sovereignty of God.

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[1] *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. xi.

Niebuhr was not satisfied with proposing theories for overcoming the weakness of moral idealism and the defensiveness of static religion. He felt "the need of testing the abstract ideas of theology and ethics in the laboratory of history."[2] It is not enough, therefore, simply to assert that Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God is radically different from Altizer's and that it calls forth human responsibility. It is necessary at least to glance briefly at some of the historical evidence Niebuhr saw. The story of the evidence he saw is, at the same time, the story of his recovery of the prophetic tradition.

Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition

The preface of The Kingdom of God in America gives clues to the story by mentioning the influence of Adolf Keller, Henri Bergson, and Karl Barth. Though it does not explicitly mention Ernst Troeltsch,[3] there are solid reasons for seeing Troeltsch's continuing influence in Niebuhr's decision to study the heritage of American Protestantism.

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[1] Ibid., pp. x-xii, 9-12, and 165-66.

[2] Ibid., p. x.

[3] Ibid., pp. vii-x.

We recall what Niebuhr learned from Troeltsch about historical relativism.[1] He learned that "we are in history as the fish is in water."[2] We lack the strength and sense of direction that come from self-understanding and self-acceptance unless we understand and accept our history. Niebuhr numbered himself among those who, "seeing the continuity of present with past, know that without retrospect no real prospect is possible."[3] Niebuhr also learned from Troeltsch that historical study can discover and describe, with some success, "the central intention, the common interest and the independent force" of a movement such as American Christianity.[4]

Troeltsch had worked out a method for discovering and verifying norms within the limits of historical relativism. Niebuhr had learned that method.[5] Norms that are firm anchors against the shifting tides of subjectivism must be solidly grounded in the past experience of the Christian community, and they must have proved their trustworthiness by having guided that community in a responsible way. Not all that is historical is helpful; Niebuhr even more than Troeltsch selected the dynamic and prophetic movements and sought to avoid the static and self-defensive.[6] Niebuhr had also learned from Troeltsch that the discovery of norms that are strong and prophetic must be made by open-minded and critical investigation of the history of Christianity. Furthermore, the norms must be pragmatically fruitful in interpreting the historical and contemporary life of the Christian churches. They must have grown up with us and have become a part of our history, so that they are now necessary and even inevitable for us if we are to live as full selves. They must be, from our faith standpoint at least, a manifestation of the action of God within relative history. These were Troeltsch's criteria for establishing norms whose authority is not endangered by historical relativism. Niebuhr was saying that the Great Tradition, the tradition of the kingdom of God, meets these criteria.[1]

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[1] See chapter i above.

[2] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 48.

[3] The Kingdom of God in America, p. 1.

[4] Ibid., p. x.

[5] See chapter i above, pp. 18-24, where the conclusions of this paragraph are discussed and documented.

[6] The Kingdom of God in America, preface and pp. 165ff.

Therefore it is no surprise that the Kingdom of God in America does for American Protestantism what Troeltsch's Social Teaching does for the whole sweep of Western Christianity. Both (1) focus on the relation between the theology of the churches and their social influence;[2] study the change in that relationship over a long sweep of history;[3] (3) try to uncover the central guiding faith of each phase of the history;[4] (4) seek to show the continuity of the guiding convictions throughout all the phases;[1] and (5) turn to these common guiding convictions as the living core of ongoing Christianity and as the uniting force that provides the independence and aggressiveness of Christianity.[2]

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[1] Ibid., pp. ix-xiii, et passim.

[2] Ibid., pp. ix-xi, 3ff., 37-40, 72-83, 100, 117-26, et passim. Cf. Troeltsch, Social Teaching, pp. 23-24ff., 32, and 34.

[3] Kingdom of God in America begins with the Protestant Reformation (pp. 17ff.) and moves to the recovery of the heritage in the 1930's (p. 198); Social Teaching, p. 25.

[4] Kingdom of God in America, pp. ix-xi et passim; Social Teaching, p. 34 et passim. Troeltsch, covering a much larger sweep of history, did not attempt so much in this regard as Niebuhr. But it was his virtue that he knew the necessity of such an attempt if meaningful understandings of social influence were to result: see Social Teaching, pp. 26ff. et passim.

It may also have been Troeltsch who pointed Niebuhr to the Puritan tradition. Troeltsch had indicted Lutheran ethical dualism even more strongly than Niebuhr had criticized liberal idealistic dualism:

> The passivity of Lutheranism involved the habit of falling back upon whatever power happens to be dominant at the time. When it was suggested that this attitude left Christians at the mercy of every rogue and brutal tyrant, Luther replied that the Government ought to see that this did not happen, and that if it failed to prevent it, then certainly the Christian must simply suffer for it.
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> . . . .
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> Finally, Lutheranism of this type hallowed the realistic sense of power, and the ethical virtues of obedience, reverence, and respect for authority, which are indispensable to Prussian militarism. Thus Christianity and a Conservative political attitude became identified with each other, as well as piety and love of power, purity of doctrine and the glorification of war and the aristocratic standpoint. Thus all attempts at Church reform were suppressed along with the world of Liberal thought. . . .[3]

Troeltsch then turned to Calvinism, and began by saying, "It was the destiny of Calvinism to extend the Reformation of the Church throughout Western Europe, and thence out into the New World, and, actually, Calvinism is the chief force in the Protestant world today."[1] The deeper reason for this wide-spread extension

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[1] Kingdom of God in America, pp. ix-xiv, 88-89, 92, 100-01, 127-29, 137, 144, 148, 151-54; Social Teaching, pp. 1004ff.

[2] Kingdom of God in America, pp. xi-xii, 2ff., 198. At this last point there is a significant difference between Troeltsch and Niebuhr: Niebuhr claimed to show only the interdependence and not the identity of the guiding convictions in the three phases of American Christianity. Therefore he could affirm a richer, more concrete, and more divergent heritage as the essence of prophetic Christianity. Cf. Social Teaching, pp. 25 and 1004-06.

[3] Social Teaching, pp. 574 and 575. I have altered the punctuation slightly.

> lies in the active character of Calvinism, in its power for forming Churches, in its international contacts, and its conscious impulse towards expansion, and, most of all in its capacity to penetrate the political and economic movements of Western nations with its religious ideal, a capacity which Lutheranism lacked from the very beginning.[2]

This must have made an impact on Niebuhr. The identification of the church with a militaristic and conservative political attitude was precisely what Niebuhr wanted to deliver Christianity from. And, on the other hand, the capacity to penetrate political and economic structures with Christianity's religious ideal was exactly what he was trying to recover.

Troeltsch had praised Puritanism for improving on Calvinism: "The patriarchal conservative elements" have been replaced by "social reform and love of liberty."[3] Niebuhr must have been intrigued by Troeltsch's conclusion: Puritanism "requires the Christian-Liberal organization of the State and of Society, . . . equality of opportunity as well as equality in the eyes of the law, the organization of international peace, and the conquest of the struggle for existence by means of self-discipline and active social help through associated effort."[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 576.

[2] Ibid., p. 577. For a different assessment, cf. Karl Holl, The Cultural Significance of the Reformation, translated by Karl and Barbara Hertz and John H. Lichtblau (New York, 1959).

[3] Social Teaching, p. 688.

[4] Ibid.

Niebuhr did not rely only or chiefly on Troeltsch's judgment. Social Sources of Denominationalism is indebted not only "to Troeltsch," but also to "Weber, Tawney, Harnack, Mueller, and Gooch," and of course to Niebuhr's own careful study of the primary sources.[1] Nor are its conclusions completely Troeltschian.[2] It is more critical of the conservative elements of Calvinism and of the eventual bourgeois and accommodating aspects of later Puritanism. But one can still hear the echoes of Troeltsch's analysis of Lutheran and Puritan ethics in Niebuhr's interpretations.[3] And when we turn to the Kingdom of God in America, and notice the similarity in both method and content between it and Troeltsch's Social Teaching, we can reach an ironical conclusion: Troeltsch the liberal Lutheran helped steer Niebuhr toward a partially Barthian reappropriation of the Puritan tradition.

Niebuhr's preface does mention the influence of Barth.[4] He saw Barth as a return to the sixteenth-century modes of thought that Troeltsch had commended—thought that was social, historical, active in combatting injustice and poverty, and "characterized above all by its fresh insistence on the present sovereignty and initiative of God."[1]

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[1] Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. vii, 285-95, et passim.

[2] See footnote 2, p. 165 below, for Niebuhr's criticism of Troeltsch's and Holl's writings on Luther.

[3] Ibid., pp. 34-37, 43-45, 97, 100-01, 122-24, et passim.

[4] Niebuhr describes his deliverance from confusion into the discovery of the sovereignty of God as follows: "What the relationships were and what unity obtained in the whole process of American Christianity became clearer to me as I brought the insights of Bergson's great study of static and dynamic faith, of Barth and many another contemporary thinker to bear upon the subject. In consequence I was led to certain discoveries in the field of American Christianity which were new to me." He then enumerates the discoveries, and they include the discovery of the importance of the theme of the sovereignty of God. Kingdom of God in America, p. xi.

The chronology of Niebuhr's growing interest in Barth shows that he saw the struggle of the Confessing Church in Germany as a major historical proving-ground for ethical responsibility. During the period from 1929 to 1932, when Niebuhr was reacting against Culture Protestantism, he considered Barth's forceful assertion of the independence of Christ from culture important enough to mention it in four of his essays.[2] But in each case he also criticized Barth as a prophet of otherworldliness and conservative reaction. Even in this early period, when Niebuhr was reacting against liberal accommodationism, he was still concerned about relevance and responsibility toward culture. Therefore he preferred the religious socialism of Tillich to the otherworldly retreat that he rightly or wrongly associated with Barth.

Then in 1932 he wrote reviews of the following books: Wilhelm Pauck's Karl Barth, Prophet of a New Christianity?, Troeltsch's Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, one book on Puritanism, and two more books on Barth and German thought.[3] In the following three years, he reviewed three more books by or about Barth.[4] In 1934 and 1935, he published reviews commending five books on the struggle of the Confessing Church.[1]

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[1] "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," pp. 176ff.; Kingdom of God in America, pp. 17ff.

[2] Social Sources of Denominationalism, pp. 275-78; "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?", pp. 914 and 916; "Religious Realism," pp. 414 and 420-28; Niebuhr, "Preface," Religious Situation, by Paul Tillich (New York, 1932), pp. xx and xxi.

[3] Raymond Morris, "Bibliography," Faith and Ethics, pp. 297-98.

[4] Ibid.

These last five books received Niebuhr's strong endorsement. They each criticize individualistic or pietistic dualism and praise the relevance of Karl Barth's emphasis on the sovereignty of God. For example, Charles S. McFarland writes that the dualism of many pietists and of many sophisticated Christian theologians led them to play into Hitler's hands. They limited the gospel to the spiritual realm and left state power unchecked.[2] Barth, on the other hand, proved his theology is anything but an otherworldly retreat; he has been directly relevant—"more persistently vocal, more incisive than any other individual . . . . His 'Theology of Crisis' is applied to the situation promptly and appropriately, and his shafts are probably more piercing than any of the others flying about in the conflict."[3] Niebuhr gave his strongest recommendation to a book written by Paul B. Means:[4] "This is the book on the German religious situation in its political, theological and ecclesiastical aspects."[5] Means makes a Troeltschian judgment of Lutheran and pietistic dualism, and praises Calvinist strength in the face of Hitler.[1] Barth is said to be unsurpassed in resisting Naziism, but the weakness of his theology is its "failure to incorporate the ideals of Christian socialism in its scope."[2] Yet there is hope that he may overcome this weakness. Barth still regards himself a Social Democrat and his "Theological Existence Today" is "a prophetic fire which relates the kingdom of God to this world."[3] Means emphasizes the need to hold together the transcendence of God and the social gospel's understanding of the rule of God on earth; he speaks of these in terms of the sovereignty of God and the kingdom of God.[4] This emphasis is particularly intriguing as a foreshadowing of the central theme of _The Kingdom of God in America_.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 298-99.

[2] Charles S. McFarland, The New Church and the New Germany: A Study of Church and State (New York, 1934), pp. 15-16, 48-55, and 75ff.

[3] Ibid., pp. 132-33. In his review of McFarland's book, Niebuhr wrote: "To students of church history in the making this well-documented and balanced account of the ecclesiastical controversy in Germany, to the end of 1933, must be highly recommended." Yale Divinity News, XXX (March, 1934), 3. See also Adolf Keller, Religion and Revolution (New York, 1934), pp. 27ff., 48-50, 68, 76, 146-49, 159ff.; K. S. Pinson, Pietism As a Factor in the Rise of German Nationalism (New York, 1934), pp. 14, 25-27, 63, 77, 118-20. Niebuhr recommended both books without reservation; Yale Divinity News, XXXI (November, 1934), 3, and ibid., XXXI (May, 1935), 1.

[4] Things That Are Caesar's: The Genesis of the German Church Conflict (New York, 1935).

[5] Niebuhr, Review of Things That Are Caesar's, Yale Divinity News, XXXII (November, 1935), 4.

Of course, Niebuhr's praise of these accounts of the Church Struggle does not prove that his assessment was identical with theirs. But the evidence cited by these books and the conclusions they reach do strongly favor the tradition of the sovereignty of God as an influence for ethical responsibility. Furthermore, Niebuhr later stated that he saw his task, as he "turned back to the 'Great Tradition,'" to be the reformation of the church. And "the struggle of the Confessing Church in Germany with German Christianity and National Socialism formed the dramatic center of the movement toward church reformation."[5]

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[1] Means, _Things That Are Caesar's_, chap. i. Means follows Troeltsch directly in his evaluation of Lutheranism, pietism, and Calvinism, and he quotes Troeltsch repeatedly.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 139-48, and 263.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 148.

[4] _Ibid_., pp. 148, 263, _et passim._

[5] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

In that struggle, Niebuhr said, "Karl Barth was the decisive spokesman for the primacy of faith, for the independence of the church, for God's transcendence. Barth functioned as the prophet of the movement though he disclaimed the role."[1]

Barth gave Niebuhr what Ernst Troeltsch was not in a position to provide. Troeltsch had pointed to the Reformation-Puritan tradition as ethically most helpful. But Troeltsch felt that the synthesis of Calvinism and liberal democracy was no longer a strong and living force in the twentieth century.[2] And he was unable to hear and transmit the basic theocentric message of that tradition with his own liberal neo-Kantian categories.[3] On the other hand, Barth and the Confessing Church, by their role in the Church Struggle, demonstrated that the tradition was still strong and could be recovered in a new form. Crisis Theology was effectively combatting the very evils Niebuhr was battling. And the Theology of Crisis was creating new categories, new conceptions of revelation and of God, new possibilities for understanding the theocentric message at the heart of prophetic American Christianity. With these new possibilities in mind, and aided by Bergson's admonition to look for the dynamic and the aggressive rather than the static and the defensive, Niebuhr discovered "the prophetic or revolutionary strain" of American Protestantism.[4]

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[1] _Ibid_.

[2] Troeltsch, _Social Teaching_, pp. 1009 and 1012.

[3] See chapter i, above, pp. 25-32.

[4] _Kingdom of God in America_, p. 11.

Politics and All Realms

Not only did the tradition of the sovereignty of God enable Niebuhr to recover the historical roots that had been lost by moral idealism; it also held promise for overcoming ethical dualism. It had demonstrated "in the laboratory of history"[1] that it tends to make Christians responsible in all realms of life rather than limiting them to the more ideal or spiritual realms. Niebuhr's historical studies in American Christianity confirmed what he observed in Germany: that aggressive transformation of politics and other realms of culture has been a repeated accomplishment of the Calvin-Edwards tradition.[2] Why has this happened? Why have activism and human responsibility so often accompanied strong affirmation of the sole sovereignty of God?

In seeking an answer to this question, Niebuhr faced a major obstacle. The obstacle was the vogue of interpreting American Christianity solely as an echo of psychological, political, social, or economic interests. Niebuhr pointed out that many social historians had noticed the dynamic activism of the Puritan tradition; but they could not explain it adequately because they saw it as a mere function of external social forces.[3]

Niebuhr himself had shown in _Social Sources of Denominationalism_ that the external method of interpretation is highly relevant. He could say with conviction that "the obvious pertinence of such description . . . makes it very attractive."[1] But his own historical studies and contemporary observations uncovered important movements of faith that are not adequately explained this way.

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[1] _Ibid_., p. x.

[2] _Ibid_., _passim_.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 4 _et passim_.

> So Bergson finds it impossible to fit the whole of religious development into the pattern of social conservation and defense; for what, on this basis, is to be done with mysticism and all creative, aggressive, dynamic faith? It is difficult if not impossible to fit Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther and many another prophet into a system of faith determined by social factors.[2]

Moreover, the external method of historical interpretation misses the self-understanding of those men and movements that are the object of study. "Every movement, like every person, needs to be understood before it can be criticized. And no movement can be understood until its presuppositions, the fundamental faith upon which it rests, have been at least provisionally adopted."[3]

So Niebuhr proposed a hypothesis. Perhaps the best way to understand the prophetic strength of the revolutionary strain is to take "our stand within the movement so that its objects may come into view."[4] Perhaps there are reasons in the faith of the movement itself which, when taken seriously, best explain the dynamic transformationism. "The paradox of Calvinism"[5] may be neither incomprehensible nor paradoxical. It may be actually true that full freedom and responsibility are to be found not where man exalts himself as self-sufficient lord of all, but precisely where he accepts the lordship of his Creator. Niebuhr criticized attempts to explain the strength of the prophetic strain which fail to take seriously its theory of man's relation to God. "It would be better to say that the dynamic result of Calvinism as of revival was a validation of the theory which lay back of both."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 9.

[2] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

[3] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[4] Ibid., p. 12.

[5] Ibid., p. 117.

Niebuhr identified three principles as basic to "the constructive Protestantism of Geneva and Scotland."[2] One was the principle of the limitation of all earthly powers. The second was the principle of constitutionalism. And "the third mark of constructive Calvinism was universalism."[3]

The principle of universalism is the affirmation of the reality of the rule of God over all things.[4] Unlike ideals, God is Lord everywhere. Therefore man is responsible to Him everywhere. "Despite its doctrine of predestination, or because of its acknowledgment that only God predestined his creatures, [the prophetic strain] resolutely refused to give up any part of human life as beyond hope of redemption."[5] Responsibility to one Lord in all realms follows directly from the prophetic faith in one sovereign God.

> Lutheranism shared these ideas in principle but in practice tended to give up the area of "natural things" as beyond the scope of the Word; separatism tried to withdraw from the established social life; but Calvinism insisted with the

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

thoroughness of the Hebrew prophets that God was king over every creature.[1]

Niebuhr describes the biblical roots of this universal responsibility in his "Introduction to Biblical Ethics"--especially in the section on Amos.[2] "The prophetic understanding of life has no room in it for the distinction often made in modern times between religion and ethics. . . . The God of the prophets is not a being with whom men are concerned only so far as they are religious."[3] The direct logical connection between universal sovereignty and universal responsibility is explicit: "Since he is Ruler of nature and history they are as close to him--or perhaps closer--in politics and economics as they are in worship."[4] This is strong language for the ears of the pious devotee of a privatized religion, and that is exactly what Niebuhr intends: "Amos, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, reserves his bitterest denunciation for those who seek to make up by means of religious rites the defects of their obedience in political and economic relations."[5]

The danger of the Great Awakening was its "tendency to see God at work only within the sphere of religious experience."[6] However, the Awakening happened in a time when the self-made man had ascended to the throne once occupied by kings and popes. Therefore "in addressing individuals the Awakeners dealt as faithfully with their own time as the prophets had done with theirs."[1]

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 40.

[2] Niebuhr, "Introduction to Biblical Ethics," *Christian Ethics*, by Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr (New York, 1955), pp. 10-45. Chapters 1, 8, 9, and 13 were the special responsibility of Niebuhr (see p. iv.).

[3] *Ibid*., p. 26.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] *Ibid*., referring to Amos 4:4-5 and 5:21-24.

[6] *Kingdom of God in America*, p. 108.

It was the Social Gospel, of course, that sought to overcome the danger of limiting the Christian message to a "private gospel" of purely subjective religion. But the Social Gospel was only reasserting what the Puritans and all their heirs knew, insofar as they were loyal to biblical faith: that the divine judgment and salvation were not merely individualistic and spiritualistic but social and temporal as well.[2] "The Hebrew prophet saw the relativity of human dominion and the reality of the divine kingdom made manifest in the crises of social rather than of individual life. Not the death of the body but the doom which threatened societies revealed the sovereignty of God."[3] The Puritans were biblical in this sense, too. Though they stressed the need for inward faith—and were thus not merely "social engineers"—they were concerned as much that England be a "Holy Commonwealth" as for the godly man. "To so Hebraic a man as Eliot and to the somewhat less Hebraic Hooker the political upheavals of the day brought home the crisis of human life, the divine aggression and the opportunity for a salvation which was not for the soul alone."[4]

Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God does more than oppose dualism and affirm Christian responsibility in all realms.

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[1] Ibid., p. 139.

[2] Ibid., p. 130.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 131.

Merely to affirm responsibility, while still maintaining idealistic norms, is to treat symptoms while ignoring the causes. The believer who hears the call for responsibility may agree, but his moral idealism still drives him toward moralism, individualism, otherworldliness and timeless abstraction. The cause needs to be cured, and the cause is the type of norm at the center of Christian idealistic ethics. Niebuhr's norm is the sovereign God. God creates and rules and redeems everywhere. His action in political events and social institutions as well as in subjective religious experience is a repeated theme in Niebuhr's writings.[1] The sovereignty of God means that God is the source of all power and all value; no realm of life has another sovereign. It means that no realm is divorced from the action that is normative for Christian ethics—the redemptive action of the one, universal Lord. "Not economics, nor politics, nor church, nor the physical life could be regarded as merely temporal in significance."[2] Because the norm of Christian ethics is the concrete historical action of God Himself, the Christian response is the same concrete transforming action everywhere—in politics as well as private life. "All life, all action takes place in the presence of the one God, is under his rule and judgment. God is not an idea in men's minds but the reality that confronts and challenges them in every moment, every place, in all nature and all history."[3]

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[1] For example, see ibid., pp. 120ff., 131, 132, and 139. All these passages occur in what one would expect to be an unlikely place: Niebuhr's description of revivalism; but they each describe the political and social transformation wrought by the preaching of the kingdom of God.

[2] Ibid., pp. 39-40.

[3] "Introduction to Biblical Ethics," p. 26.

The problem of dualism versus conversionism is the main point on which Troeltsch criticized Lutheranism and commended Puritanism. Niebuhr agrees, choosing Luther as a major representative of the dualist type of ethics.[1] But Niebuhr has a greater appreciation of the dynamic elements in Luther's doctrine of God and of man. Although Troeltsch was right that Luther makes strong distinctions between the temporal and the spiritual, Luther "does not divide what he distinguishes. The life . . . in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, are closely related. The Christian must affirm both in a single act of obedience to the one God of mercy and wrath."[2]

Niebuhr shares Luther's concern for the independence of the gospel from the technical rules and content of our action: "If we look to the revelation of God for our knowledge of geology, we miss the revelation; but if we look to geology for faith in God, we miss both Him and the rocks."[3] But he criticizes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "the pseudo-Lutheran ethic" for reasons almost identical to Bonhoeffer's and Troeltsch's.[4] Whereas Luther's position was dynamic and dialectical, "its reproductions by many who called themselves his followers were static and undialectical. They substituted two parallel moralities for his closely related ethics. . . . The freedom of the Christian man became autonomy in all the special spheres of culture."[1]

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[1] Christ and Culture, p. 170.

[2] Ibid., p. 172. Niebuhr's footnote comment reveals his awareness of Troeltsch's limitations as pointed out by Karl Holl. It also criticizes Holl as well from a typically Niebuhrian ecumenical and conversionist perspective: "An excellent description of Luther's development as Christian ethical thinker and reformer is given in Prof. Karl Holl's article "Der Neubau der Sittlichkeit" . . . . Holl's treatment unfortunately is marked by an anti-Catholic bias, corresponding to the anti-Lutheran animus of such writers as Grisar, and by a desire to show how original Luther was even in comparison with Augustine. The article, however, is superior to the widely used treatment of Luther's ethics by Ernst Troeltsch in his Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, Vol. II. Holl's interpretation of Luther's attitude toward culture makes him more of a conversionist than the present writer finds tenable."

[3] Christ and Culture, p. 176.

[4] Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York, 1965), pp. 96-105 and 196-207.

Niebuhr deeply appreciates Luther's profound treatment of justification, of human sin, of trust and inner regeneration, of the conflict between self-love and the absoluteness of the gospel.[2] The real object of his criticism is not Luther; it is the ethical dualism that appears in Lutheranism, Protestant scholasticism, Baptist pietism, idealism, liberalism, nationalism, and in the tendency of Barthians in Germany to concentrate on "a new assertion of the freedom of the Word" while turning their backs on matters of justice and power politics.[3]

> Conservatism seems indeed to be directly connected with the dualist position. If it has nevertheless contributed to social change, this has resulted largely without its intention, and not without the assistance of other groups. Conservatism is a logical tendency to think of law, state, and other institutions as restraining forces, dykes against sin, preventers of anarchy, rather than as positive agencies through which men in social union render positive service to neighbors advancing toward true life. Moreover, for the dualists such institutions belong wholly to the temporal and dying world.[4]

Niebuhr wanted an ethic that would positively serve neighbors and transform culture not occasionally and by accident but consistently and by intention. The universal sovereignty of God formed the basis of that ethic. The dynamic rulership of God over all things means

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1. *Christ and Culture*, p. 179.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-79; *Christian Ethics*, pp. 235-43.

3. *Kingdom of God in America*, pp. 37-39.

4. *Christ and Culture*, p. 188.

that law, state, and other institutions are not fixed orders, but ever changing subjects of His dynamic lordship. These institutions are never to be absolutized, but are always under His judgment; and they are never solely negative, but are always a mixture of both sin and the redeeming power of God.

CHAPTER VII

RESPONSIBILITY IN THE DIVINE "NOW": LIMITATION OF POWERS AND REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION

Independence and the Limitation of Powers

It is not enough for the transformationist to be driven by his faith toward responsibility in all realms of life. His faith must also help him distinguish between relative causes and the kingdom of God. It is not enough to battle the irresponsibility of irrelevance; the idolatry of identifying some relative human power with the one God is equally irresponsible, and must be combatted as well. Niebuhr's study of denominationalism and national socialism taught him that identifying the gospel with some institution or some individual, some status quo or some revolutionary cause, is a real and present danger. The cultural captivity of the church causes fanaticism, totalitarianism, hypocrisy and moral impotence.[1]

The independence of uninvolvement is no answer.[2] Quietism, sitting on one's hands to keep them pure and free from dirt, is hardly the kind of freedom that characterizes the loyal subject of the active, dynamic Sovereign revealed in Christ. The freedom that belongs to the citizen of the kingdom of God is the freedom of a responsible self, not a hermit. This freedom is the gift of God, and it receives its character from the Emancipator whose freedom is usually seen in active involvement and "concern . . . for the weak and distressed," for "foreigners, widows, orphans, the poor."[1]

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[1] "Nationalism, Socialism, and Christianity," pp. 469-70; Church Against the World, pp. 1ff. and 142-48.

[2] Church Against the World, p. 149 *et passim*.

But while He is actively involved in particular needs and concrete events such as the Exodus, the sovereign God remains the living, dynamic, eternal Judge and Redeemer. He cannot be possessed by any relative human power.[2] He judges all institutions, and the manner of his redemption is always a surprise to those who are righteous as well as unrighteous.[3] No doctrine, no matter how orthodox, no institution, whether political or ecclesiastical, no human good will, no matter how pure and moral, can claim to possess or to be identified with God. If the norm of Christian ethics is the living God, then the Christian life is never arrival but always metanoia, always permanent revolution.[4]

When the sovereign God rather than human good will is the object of trust, man need not clutch defensively to the fetish of his good intentions. Man is freed to let God judge the will and redeem it from making a god of itself. When man is given trust in the sovereign God, he begins to be freed from the need to make gods of relative causes. He begins to be freed from his captivity: from slavery to self, "from bondage to those physical and cultural values without which we think we cannot live," from bondage to law. He is freed from self-defense, and he is freed to love his neighbor.[1]

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[1] "Introduction to Biblical Ethics," pp. 20-21.

[2] Kingdom of God in America, pp. xiv-xv.

[3] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 85, 121, and 167-68.

[4] Kingdom of God in America, pp. xiv-xv, 66-75ff., and 129f.

Because God alone is sovereign, all human powers and causes no matter how good are restrained from claiming sovereignty for themselves. "The rule of limitation of all human power" is one of the three principles of constructive Calvinism, as Niebuhr describes it. He points to the limitation of all human power as a guiding principle for the American Protestant founding fathers: "The only ultimate answer to the universal tendency of finite power to exalt and absolutize itself lay, it was recognized, in redemption, but short of a final harmonization of all powers restraint was necessary."[2] Niebuhr contrasts the checks and balances of the American Constitution with the unrealistic enthusiasm and optimism of the French Constitution. He suggests that "in many ways this doctrine that God alone was sovereign and that therefore all human exercise of power needed to be limited became a profound influence in American life, even when its sources were forgotten."[3]

The same rule of limitation of all human power "applied to every finite reality, not to the state alone."[4] Church power was restricted to the congregation, and "the congregation further was prevented from becoming a 'Beast' by being subjected to the rule of the covenant and of the Scriptures, and by the dispersion of power between elders and brethren who checked each other."[1]

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[1] "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," pp. 224-25.

[2] Kingdom of God in America, p. 75. See also pp. 22f.

[3] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[4] Ibid., p. 80.

God's rule occurs in the midst of imperfect conditions. It is not dependent on perfect institutions or men. Therefore man can hope without having to romanticize his situation. By contrast, "our time speaks of God's kingdom when it means an ideal for future human society. Such a kingdom may be a wish, a plan, a dream, an ideal or a goal. It is an 'ought-to-be,' in contrast to the 'is.'" But the Puritans knew God already "is." He is active in the midst of necessities and realities, dangers and possibilities, sober and happy thoughts. Therefore the Puritan ethic, in contrast to moral idealism, "is realistic rather than idealistic. The leaders do not speak so much of high-flown plans as of grim necessities."[2] They are freed from false hopes by their faith in God who rules in the concrete events of present indicative actuality. They have no need to be overly optimistic.

> Seventeenth century Protestants could not be utopians or idealists in the popular sense of the words, for they did not share the fundamental presuppositions of utopianism—the beliefs that human ills are due to bad institutions, that a fresh start with good institutions will result in a perfect commonwealth, and that human reason is sufficiently wise, or human will sufficiently selfless, to make the erection of a perfect society possible.[3]

On the other hand, Christian ethics based on faith in the present rule of God has no need to be overly pessimistic. It is not based on the fatalistic view that sin is the real lord everywhere and that therefore nothing is to be done. Helmut Gollwitzer contends that fatalism may have become the most travelled route to the abdication of responsibility.[1] In that case, the theme of the sovereignty of God could hardly be more relevant. For if the God who is the ruler of our present and our future is trustworthy, then we no longer need respond to time as an unstoppable machine whose indifference condemns us gradually to death.[2] Instead

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 83. For limitations on other powers based on the same principle, see *ibid*., pp. 96-98, 100, and 104-05.

[2] *Ibid*., pp. 46-47.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 49.

> we begin to understand all that happens to us and to which we react as occurring in a final context of life-giving rather than death-dealing, as occurring in a universal teleology of resurrection rather than a universal teleology of entombment. Our response now is to commandments given with the promise of life rather than with the threat of death; it becomes response to action that holds before us the sure anticipation of glory—not our glory but the glory of all being. As all our actions of short-term or long-term purposiveness, of obedience or disobedience to the laws, were once shaped to fit into an interaction ending in destruction, they are now shaped—insofar as we are reconciled—into an interaction moving always toward universal, eternal life. The ethics of death is replaced by the ethics of life, of the open future, of the open society.[3]

Man is freed to base his decisions on an open, honest interpretation of what is going on in the world; his hope is in the Ruler who is active in the midst of present, concrete events but whose lordship is not determined by the success of a utopian ideal. Thus the early Puritans could found new nations and transform both church and state, all the while basing their actions on accurate assessments of actual situations. They decided to come to America, said Governor Bradford,

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[1] Helmut Gollwitzer, The Demands of Freedom (New York and Evanston, 1965), pp. 29-32.

[2] Albert Camus, L'étranger (France, 1957), pp. 158-67; cf. Responsible Self, pp. 115-26, 136-45, and 165-78.

[3] Responsible Self, pp. 142-43.

"not out of any newfangledness, or other such like giddie humor, by which men are often transported to their great hurt and danger but for sundrie weightie and solid reasons."[1] They decided to come to America for realistic reasons: Holland was a hard place to live, old age might scatter their flock, the children were being tempted by exposure to Holland's enticements and by rebellion against hard labor, and because they hoped God might use them to be stepping stones for others to advance the gospel "in those remote parts of the world," i.e., North America.[2] Niebuhr was impressed with the results of their realistic faith: they did get to America, they established a new nation and a workable democracy, wrote a realistic constitution and made it work, and pioneered in the separation of church and state.[3]

While it is true that Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God has led to an explicitness about the reality of man's sin and the need for limitation of his power,[4] it has never led to an ethics based primarily on sin. He never uses the manifest reality of human sin in the events of our century as an argument for the necessity of belief in God. He never seeks to exalt God by degrading man. He always rejects any tendencies to think of God merely as the rescuer after man has come to the end of his rope, or as the chink that fills the cracks that man's reason can not cover. God is not the corollary of man's limitation. Rather, man's need for limitation is the corollary of God's sole sovereignty. Christian ethics is not sin-centered ethics but God-centered ethics. God is always actively present, always the central protagonist, always inviting men to respond to His action with universal and free responsibility. Man is most free and most fulfilled when he accepts the role of co-actor and finds his part in the drama that God is enacting. Then man has a cause that is not merely an idolatry or a fad that passes away.[1]

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[1] Kingdom of God in America, p. 47.

[2] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

[3] Ibid., pp. 45ff., 53-54, 66ff., 77-79, and 81-82.

[4] Cf. "Man the Sinner," pp. 272-80.

Revolution with a Strategy

Niebuhr's study of the history of American Christianity impressed him with the revolutionary character of the Great Tradition. Again and again, the consequence of loyalty to the sovereign God has been revolutionary redirection of the course of human action.

Niebuhr suggests that the first clue to the revolution-engendering effectiveness of this faith is its way of freeing and rechanneling the inner sources of human action. It engages and transforms basic human loyalties. One example is the Great Awakening, which, as Niebuhr indicates, was followed by dramatic changes in self-understanding, in habits, in social and political institutions. The preachers who led the Awakening were not so foolish as to count on men to rally behind the cause of simple altruism and ideals. "They were all well aware that man's altruism and idealism are not only unreliable but also . . . bound to the chariot of self-interest, so that they easily become subterfuges of the will to power and of self-assertion."[1] The freedom that the preachers sought begins not with the discovery of an adequate ideal, but with "the redirection of the will to live and the liberation of the drive in human life from the inhibitions of fear, conflict and the sense of futility."[2] They knew that the will "is always loyal to something and its problem is how to transfer its loyalty from the ephemeral, the partial, and the relative, which by assuming absoluteness become devilish, to the eternal, universal and truly absolute."[3]

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[1] "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 222; "Introduction to Biblical Ethics," pp. 39-40; Kingdom of God in America, p. 79.

Another revolutionary period was the Protestant Reformation itself. It, too, began with a transference of the will's loyalty from defensive partialities to the universal Sovereign. Niebuhr usually points to Martin Luther and restates basic themes of Luther's gospel when he describes his own understanding of the redirection of the will. It is Luther who so "thoroughly understood that the gospel as law and as promise was not directly concerned with the overt actions of men but with the springs of conduct."[4] The springs of man's action are choked up by defensive distrust of the Power that gives life and determines existence.

> As long as man mistrusts his Creator he will in his anxiety for himself and his goods be unable to do anything in all his service of others but serve himself. He is involved in the vicious circle of self-love, which leads him to look for credit for every apparently altruistic action, and which makes even his service of

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 102-03.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

[4] *Christ and Culture*, p. 173. See also *Christian Ethics*, p. 238, and *Radical Monotheism*, pp. 119ff.

God a work for which he expects the reward of approval.[1] A change is needed, the change that began the Reformation and that burst forth again in the Great Awakening.

> Christ by his law and by his deed of redemption breaks this circle of self-love, and creates trust in God and reliance on Him as the only one who can and does make men righteous—not within themselves but in the response to Him of their humbled and grateful hearts. Luther understood that the self could not conquer self-love, but that it was conquered when the self found its security in God, was delivered from anxiety and thus set free to serve the neighbor self-forgetfully.[2]

The reconciliation that was experienced in the Reformation and the Great Awakening is not mere subjective reconciliation to one's own private, isolated, anxious self. It is reconciliation to the Determiner of Destiny. The problem of the will is relational; man is fearful not only of himself as an isolated individual, but of his alienation from the Giver of life and death. Nor is the reconciliation merely self-manipulation and stimulation of self-confidence. If it were merely that, then the liberator would be one's own confidence, and the god he serves would remain an idol—the idol of self-confidence. Man would remain fearful of the death of that idol and distrustful of the Lord who rules over life and death. "Only the action of God himself is sufficient to effect the transfer, and so the divine sovereignty stands at the gate of the kingdom of Christ."[3] The problem is to let the will be redirected in trust toward the one Liberator who does not die and who does not cause despair and disillusionment.

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1. Christ and Culture, p. 173.
2. Ibid., pp. 173-74.
3. Kingdom of God in America, p. 103.

"Unless [the divine sovereignty] opens the portals they remain closed and closed the tighter because man presses against them in the wrong direction."[1]

Niebuhr's way of taking the sovereignty of God seriously overcomes an impasse that still continues to trouble Protestantism. It overcomes the impasse between the social gospel that has become a red flag for many evangelicals, and the private gospel of "methodism" or individualistic pietism whose social irresponsibility Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr attack. Individual conversion and cleansing the springs of action in the inner man, proclaimed so clearly by Luther and the Great Revival, are central to the prophetic tradition. The sovereignty of God challenges all other loyalties and calls for the turning around of repentance. At the same time, what one turns toward, what one is converted to, is not an introspective emotion but a sovereign whose lordship is one and the same in the church, in racial reconciliation, in political change. The Christian is freed not only from captivity but for responsible participation in God's rule, and God's rule is happening in social as well as individual realms of life. The social gospel, the Puritan gospel, and the gospel of the revivals are incomplete and abortive without one another.[2] Their strong points fit together, and their weak points are corrected by one another, when they are all subordinated to "the sovereignty of God and the revelation of his rule in Jesus Christ."[3]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

[3] Ibid., p. xii.

The same Christian liberty that Luther described became a present experience, in the "now," for each new revolutionary period in prophetic American Christianity. "The common conviction was that whereas before the revolution of Jesus Christ" life was fearful and hopeless, men "now had experienced or could experience the 'expulsive power of a new affection' which made a life of freedom possible."[1] This, then, is the first way in which the divine sovereignty engenders revolution—it redirects man's basic loyalties from fear and defensiveness to reconciliation, liberty, and mutual service.

The second clue to the revolutionary effectiveness of the Great Tradition is its possession of a strategy and a constitution. It is neither uncoordinated, utopian, nor anarchic. It is based on a concrete pattern of action clearly demonstrated in history, in Jesus Christ. "The divine sovereignty, according to the Awakeners, is fundamental . . . in a second way. God has acted and is acting in history; in Jesus Christ he has brought in the great change which has opened to men the kingdom of liberty and love."[2] Because Puritans and Awakeners alike had seen God's action in Jesus Christ, they could discern his action, his revolution, when it began to happen now in their midst. They could discern it, proclaim it, and participate in it with a common and shared strategy. Puritans, Quakers, and Separatists were all convinced "that the kingdom had begun a new career upon earth with Jesus

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[1] Ibid., p. 90. In an article entitled "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," in American Religion, ed. by J. W. Smith and A. L. Jamison (Princeton, 1961), pp. 32-33 and 46-47, Niebuhr emphasizes even more strongly "the good news these evangelicals heard and preached," that salvation and forgiveness and God's election are not past or future but now.

[2] Kingdom of God in America, p. 103.

Christ." They were convinced "that Roman Catholicism had lost the benefits of this revolution, and that the Reformation was the resumption of the revolutionary movement."[1] They knew what freedom in Christ was like; they had seen in Christ the strategy of God's plan of battle; they could therefore recognize the freedom that was being given in the midst of their own historical skirmishes. They were not milling around without a strategy for action.

As we have seen, their strategy began with the redirecting of basic loyalties. Their first task therefore was the gathering of the church. "As divine determinists, they could no more put political construction in the first place than economic determinists can begin with religion."[2] But their task also included politics, because God is lord of all of life. They saw in "the political upheavals of the day . . . the crisis of human life, the divine aggression and the opportunity for a salvation which was not for the soul alone."[3]

Previously we have examined two principles that Niebuhr singles out as basic to the prophetic Puritan tradition: the universality of God's rule and the limitation of all human powers.[4] These two principles, of course, provide important guidance for the strategy of the revolution. But Niebuhr also singles out a third principle that shapes the revolution even more. The third principle he calls "constitutionalism." The Puritans and their heirs had a tentative picture of the Holy Commonwealth they were attempting to establish. They believed both church and state are equally "subject to a common constitution, the will of God declared in Scripture and nature."[1]

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[1] _Ibid_., p. 89.

[2] _Ibid_., p. 68.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 131.

[4] See above, pp. 159ff. and 168ff.

Niebuhr's use of the term, "constitutionalism," points to an alternative between anarchic subjectivism and archaic literalism. A constitution does provide guidelines and limits, but it does not spell out all the details of implementation. The test it applies to all actions is not whether they repeat old patterns literalistically but whether they operate within certain criteria. The constitution does not prevent creativity and resourcefulness; it encourages them by channeling them in constructive directions, by giving them broad freedom and basic guidelines.

Because God is Lord, the pattern of His action in our history is the constitution that tests and guides all our action. Man is not left with vague and abstract ideals, with a high-sounding slogan of "liberty, equality, fraternity"; he has a concrete, historical, and realistic guide for responsible citizenship.

> The principle of Christian constitutionalism is directly corollary to the principle of God's sovereignty. Since God is the source of all power and value, his nature and his will rather than human nature and human desires or ideals need to be consulted in all human actions. Furthermore, if God is really the beginning, his character and intention need to be learned from himself and not prescribed to him. . . . God's revelation of himself, then, can be the only basis for the organization of life under his sovereignty.[2]

All Protestants agreed "that this revelation was somehow to be found in Scripture."[3] But the Bible could not simply be equated with revelation. To have equated living revelation and written word would have been a "denial of the fundamental conviction upon which the faith in revelation rested--the belief in the living divine initiative."[1] It would have implied "that God had virtually retired from the world since declaring himself to the ancients. . . . Yet with a stubbornness which indicated how much was at stake they sought to remain close to the Scriptures in all their work."[2] The result was

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[1] Kingdom of God in America, p. 39.

[2] Ibid., p. 59.

[3] Ibid.

> a biblical constitutionalism in which the revelation of God recorded in the Scriptures was conceived as a double covenant which was not indeed the source of the laws that needed to be enacted for the common life or even wholly of the doctrines which were to be taught in the churches, but which was the constant check upon the vagrant desires of individuals or masses and upon the subjective inspirations of self-appointed prophets or the specious reasonings of self-confident wise men.[3]

Puritanism was tempted "to fall into a narrow constructionism, to use its constitution not only as the criterion by which all new ideas and measures were to be tested but as the source of all such ideas and measures."[4] Separatists and Quakers, on the other hand, were tempted to fall into subjectivism and individualism. But they all found it necessary "to acknowledge the principle of Christian constitutionalism, the principle namely that the revelation of God in Christ was the test which needed to be applied in every case. . . ."[5] This, then, is the second reason for the revolutionary effectiveness of the Great Tradition: it has a common strategy, based on the pattern of revolution and the constitution that are revealed in Israel and in Jesus.

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[1] Ibid., p. 62.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 120.

Third, the actuality of the divine revolution's happening in their midst gave prophetic Protestants the courage to follow their strategy. Because the loyalty of the early Protestants was not merely to Jesus Christ as a teacher of benevolent ideals but to Jesus Christ as the present Lord of history, there was reason for courage in the face of stubborn foes. The flag to which they were loyal "represented power and law as well as benevolence in which men could trust when they had lost confidence in their own good will and in that of their ecclesiastical and political overlords."[1] The Lord of history was on the side of freedom. They had seen and experienced the kind of freedom he gives. Therefore they could pioneer in new kinds of ecclesiastical and political liberty. "They had confidence in the promise that God would write his laws upon the inward parts and make men fit for liberty, and they knew he was doing it now. Hence they were not afraid of freedom as the traditionalists were."[2] They had the strategy and the courage of revolutionaries.

> They followed their own line of attack, preaching the kingdom of Christian liberty, the conversion of minds and hearts to the love of God and of man in God. They pursued the ultimate and permanent revolution, the complete liberty of man in a community of love. Because they did so the struggles for a limited liberty profited. In America as in England the Christian enlightenment stood beside the rational enlightenment in the battle for democracy, and it furnished ten soldiers to the cause where the latter furnished one, for it dealt with the common men about whom the rationalists wrote books.[3]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

[3] *Ibid.* See also pp. 89 and 119-25. James Hastings Nichols has described the democratic influence of the Great Tradition, though

The new liberty, the new strategy, and the new courage also created a new kind of man. The new man was concerned for his neighbor, accustomed to self-discipline, a citizen able to accept responsibility, ready for democracy. He was meant to be free.[1] The new order of liberty and its inner self-discipline were being communicated to unschooled frontiersmen and even to Roger Williams' Indians:

> America has produced few more beautiful devotional books than Roger Williams' Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health, "penned and writ" for the most part, as he said, "in the thickest of the naked Indians of America, in their very wild houses, and by their barbarous fires." Its purpose, in the author's words, was "to fill each truly Christian soule with triumph and rejoycing," and to speak "peace and joy to the Weakest Lamb and Child" in Christianity. . . . It reveals a man who was concerned with the law written on the inward parts of those who, poor in spirit, hungered and thirsted after a true goodness and found it offered to them by the revolution inaugurated by Jesus Christ.[2]

The new order of liberty and love meant that "the church was to be the church of free men in Christ."[3]

> It has often been noted that this church democracy became a school of political democracy. What needs to be emphasized even more is that the whole outlook on life which lay back of church democracy was one which definitely looked toward liberty in all the relations of life. . . . The permanent revolution in which they were engaged was designed to make men fit for ever greater freedom.[4]

There are historical connections between the Great Awakening and many movements that transformed American culture: the American Revolution with its resultant democracy, the missionary movement, the antislavery

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with an anti-Roman Catholic overtone that Niebuhr did not share. Democracy and the Churches (Philadelphia, 1951).

[1] Kingdom of God in America, p. 125.

[2] Ibid., pp. 91-92.

[3] Ibid., p. 97.

[4] Ibid., p. 98.

movement, the Sunday School movement, the battle for public education, the founding of colleges and secondary schools, the founding of asylums for the care of the sick and the unfortunate.[1]

> Credit must be given to many influences besides the revival for the great development of humanitarian and charitable enterprises . . . but it is significant that the leaders of these enterprises were often products of the religious movement. . . . Every humanitarian cause—temperance, peace, prison reform, the amelioration of poverty—became the rallying point of ardent souls who had been kindled by the gospel of the kingdom of Christ. Yet it was characteristic of the true kingdom that it did not point to these fruits as evidence of its right to exist or defend itself by praising its social utility. For these fruits also Christ not the Christian was to be praised, and God not the church was to be thanked.[2]

Still, there was a lot to be thankful for.

Revolution, liberty, constitution, courage, free citizenship, free church and society: this is how Niebuhr describes the results of trust in Christ as revealer of the world's actual Sovereign, rather than simply as teacher of ideals. This is not impotent idealism. It moves men. It makes them revolutionaries, though constitutional rather than anarchist revolutionaries. Once more we return to the "paradox of Calvinism":

> The dynamic result of Calvinism as of revival was a validation of the theory which lay back of both. This theory was that human power to do good did not need to be generated but needed only to be released from the bondage to self and the idols, from the conflict in which divided loyalty involved man and in which power inhibited power, from the frustration by which the vanity of all temporal things discouraged life. Deliverance, atonement, hope came from reconciliation to God and from faith in his forgiveness. So when Christians found themselves short of good works, of genuine love to their fellows—as indeed they constantly did—they did not try to whip up their wills by admonitions, threats and promises. They sought to cleanse the fountains of life. In penitence and longing they turned to worship, to self-

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[1] *Ibid*., pp. 119ff. and 153ff.

[2] *Ibid*., pp. 122-23.

examination in the presence of God, to the contemplation of the cross of Christ.[1]

Dynamic Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

There are some possible misunderstandings of Niebuhr's point that must be rejected. Niebuhr is not advocating the sovereignty of a God who is either the utilitarian means to a social end, or the disinterred remains of a dead tradition, or the problem-solver who fills the gaps where humans are incapable of responsibility.

First, the God whose sovereignty Niebuhr proclaims is the living God who cannot be possessed by any social institution or social ideology. He is not "the high God of social faith," before whom many in the twentieth century are eager to sacrifice themselves.[2] The reason for believing in Him is not the utilitarian reason that faith contributes to democracy or to social revolution. Niebuhr condemns such religious utilitarianism as idolatry.[3] *The Kingdom of God in America* is not the story of the triumph of any social ideology, but of the "hard, unyielding core which kept religion from becoming a mere function" of a social ideology.[4] Niebuhr's work in the laboratory of history was not an attempt to discover a Christian faith that helped create certain features of American culture. It was an attempt to discover a Christian faith that is true to itself. He was seeking to account for the independent protest, the reforming activity, and the social responsibility of the prophetic movement for the reason that these are the characteristics of the Christian faith whenever it is true to its own biblical, theocentric nature.[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 118. Cf. p. 103 and "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," pp. 222-23 and 226.

[2] "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," p. 71.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 49; "Utilitarian Christianity," *Christianity and Crisis*, VI (July 8, 1946), 3-5; *Kingdom of God in America*, pp. 12 and 123; *Radical Monotheism*, pp. 24ff.

[4] *Kingdom of God in America*, p. xi.

Second, the God whose sovereignty Niebuhr proclaims is the God of present crisis, the living God who is "Lord of the present."[2] His present and dynamic rule exposes all attempts to treat history as if it were not moving, as if one could simply dig up and preserve the words and concepts of a Jonathan Edwards and make them normative in the present. The sovereignty of God that Niebuhr proclaims is not the disinterred remains of a tradition which, though once alive, is now preserved in cold and rigid form for antiquarian reasons.

Niebuhr does not commend all that goes by the name of Puritanism. What excites him is the dynamic and prophetic character of the early, formative, and creative period of the movement. This early Puritanism differs from the petrified Puritanism of "Cotton Mather, who is so often and so unfortunately used as an example of Puritanism itself."[3]

Niebuhr pays close attention to Mather in order to diagnose what has gone wrong, what has been lost, in petrified Puritanism. Mather preserved "much of the old loyalty to the divine sovereignty . . .;

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xvi.

[2] "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," pp. 227-28. Cf. "Protestant Movement and Democracy," pp. 32-34 and 46-47.

[3] *Kingdom of God in America*, p. 170.

yet in what perverted form!" In his theology the independence of God has been lost: the kingdom has been narrowed "to the dominion of the English Reformation, and of that Reformation Boston was the chief glory."[1] The sense of God's dynamic rule in all realms in the present has also been lost:

> He looked to the past, to the incomparable institutions of the fathers, to the Sabbath day ordinances, the Congregational order and discipline, and the laws of the commonwealth. With all his eagerly displayed learning he defended the established order which, in his estimation, came nearer to perfection than any other Christian society in the world.[2]

Furthermore, in Mather's theology, the revolutionary action of God as revealed in Christ and in conscience is also missing:

> The reign of Christ had become a habit. The law written upon the inward parts was for Cotton Mather an inscription to be endlessly studied in a state of hypochondriac introspection. . . . The brave objectivism of the early Puritans which demanded only that God's will be done is turned into febrile subjectivism which evermore asks whether the heart of the doer is good. The message of the kingdom of Christ is translated into a new, spiritualized version of the law, as exacting in its demands, as minutely defined and hedged about and as full of temptation to Pharisaism as any external legal code ever was.[3]

At other periods in the history of American Christianity the living God of present events was similarly transformed into a habit and a doctrine rather than a reality. The Great Awakening eventually cooled off. "The crisis of the kingdom of Christ was passed. . . . Henceforth the kingdom of the Lord was a human possession, not a permanent revolution."[4] The sense that the kingdom had become a

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1. *Ibid*., p. 171.
2. *Ibid*., p. 171.
3. *Ibid*., pp. 171-72.
4. *Ibid*., p. 179.

possession produced self-righteous nationalism and imperialism.[1]

Liberalism, too, has had its petrified forms. "Not everything that assumed the name was dynamic. . . . Rationalistic liberalism as represented by the Deists in England, the rationalists of France and their few American followers, was as static in its conceptions and as self-righteous in its attitudes as the ecclesiastical orthodoxy it opposed."[2] Niebuhr points out the same problem in the liberalism of the early twentieth century:

> Whatever sense of divine sovereignty the earlier generations had retained, their successors defined God as the object of religion and made this function of the human spiritual life the only executive arm of God's government. It was not God who ruled, but religion ruled a little, and religion needed God for its support. Whatever memory of the gospel of rebirth had been conserved by early romanticism, the later liberalism increasingly identified human values with the divine, proclaimed the glad tidings of progress and hallowed man's moral efforts though they led to civil, international and class war.[3]

Niebuhr reinterprets the history of American Christianity not in order to go back to the past but in order "to understand the present and its future."[4] He is pointing to the sovereignty of God in order to recover that source of active responsibility, of prophetic judgment, of universal transformation that is missing in petrified and defensive Christianity. His is a new and creative reinterpretation. He is pointing toward new possibilities in the twentieth century in hopes that there might be "a new aggression . . . a new spirit stirring . . . a spiritual unrest which might become the seed plot of new life."[1]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 185.

[3] Ibid., p. 195.

[4] Ibid., p. 1.

It is not tradition at all that Niebuhr is really advocating; he is advocating the living reality that is present to different traditions in new and different ways. He is advocating a new outburst—the sort of outburst that happens in those traditions which center not in themselves but in the living God who is not the possession of any tradition. The issue is "not between ideas but rather between dead tradition, no matter what its content, and the living tradition."[2] And the living tradition is neither an unchanging idea nor a static form but a movement:

> The kingdom of God in America is neither an ideal nor an organization. It is a movement which, like the city of God described by Augustine in ancient times, appears in only partial and mixed manner in the ideas and institutions in which men seek to fix it.[3]

Finally, the God whose sovereignty Niebuhr proclaims is not the religious problem-solver who fills the gaps where humans are incapable of responsibility. The need-meeting or problem-solving understanding of God has been attacked, of course, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He contends that ours is a world come of age, a world responsible for itself, a world that wants to solve its own problems. "Religious" Christianity is retreating from this secular world. It locates God only where man is helpless, and so it tries

> to prove to a world thus come of age that it cannot live without the tutelage of "God." Even though there has been surrender on all secular problems, there still remain the

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 198.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 189.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 164. Cf. "The Protestant Movement and Democracy," pp. 23-24.

> so-called ultimate questions—death, guilt—on which only "God" can furnish an answer. . . . But what if one day they no longer exist as such, if they too can be answered without "God"?[1]

Bonhoeffer insists that

> God cannot be used as a stop-gap. We must not wait until we are at the end of our tether: he must be found at the centre of life: in life, and not only in death; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in activity, and not only in sin.[2]

This is an echo of Niebuhr's lifelong emphasis on the real, active, present sovereignty of God in all of creation rather than merely in a spiritual realm. In The Kingdom of God in America, a quarter-century before Bonhoeffer was being discovered in this country, Niebuhr wrote that the kingdom of God is not "administration by means of special miracles," always baffling human explanation like a wonder-working magician.[3]

> The God of Protestant faith was not the First Cause of a later Deism, but neither was he the meddling deity of eighteenth century supernaturalism. His relation to nature was intimate and close. Nature, as a recent writer has put it, was like a glove upon his hand. Nothing happened which was not in relation to him and was not therefore a meet occasion for penitence or praise. Yet he appeared in ordinary rather than in special events. His rule was manifested, as it had been for Jesus, in the rain which fell on just and unjust, in the sun which shone on evil and good, in storms by sea and drought by land, rather than in the miraculous happenings which sanctimonious piety, adulterated with superstition, loved to relate and embellish. The Protestants saw the law of God in the immutable ways, in the actual pattern of reality to which revelation had given the key and which reason, following upon revelation, could discern.[4]

The "God of the gaps" understanding involves two fundamental misconceptions that Niebuhr corrects. One misconception concerns the nature of human responsibility.

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[1] Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 107.

[2] Ibid., p. 104.

[3] Kingdom of God in America, p. 55.

[4] Ibid.

If human responsibility is conceived as a state of isolation, if one is responsible only when he can declare that his action is purely self-made and shared by no one, then of course there is no room for God or any "Thou" in human responsibility. But this is an irresponsible conception of responsibility. It does not fit "in the modern period of human history when our attention has been so strongly directed to the social character of all human life."[1] Niebuhr profoundly and consistently insists "that the self is fundamentally social."[2] To be responsible in actual life is to be responsible with others, for others, and to others.[3] To seek a kind of responsibility that is solitary and does not give account to others is flight from actuality. It is precisely what moral irresponsibility consists of.[4] We have noticed that The Kingdom of God in America describes human freedom and responsibility as dialogue, as response, as citizenship and as revolution. Each of these is social; man finds responsibility not by escape into a solitary other world, but by participation with his fellow actors in the drama of this world, which is a social world. The kind of freedom and responsibility that man is made for finds its fulfillment in citizenship, in the pursuit of justice, in love to one's neighbor.

There was hearty agreement upon the fundamental point among all

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 69.

[2] Ibid., p. 71.

[3] Ibid., pp. 71ff. "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," pp. 114-20.

[4] "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," pp. 115 and 124-26.

> Protestants. The kingdom of God is not a reign of terror but one of love, not of law but of liberty. God has willed to reconcile men to his will, to write his law upon their hearts, and he has done this by means of Jesus Christ. He who has become a citizen of the true kingdom of Christ, or of the invisible church, is free. He does good, he executes justice, he loves his neighbor, he has public spirit, not because he is constrained by external laws and sanctions, but because he is no longer concerned about himself and can love goodness for its own sake.[1]

This freedom does not assume that the Christian becomes unselfish enough to be exempt from the divine constitution and the checks and balances of other citizens. The Puritans agreed that "'the will of man is made perfect and immutably free to good alone in the state of Glory onely.'"[2] In the present state of grace, man is free to will the good, but not free from corruption. "They insisted, therefore, that the citizen of the kingdom of Christ continued to require discipline. In the upshot the separatists practically agreed with them, for they also exercised a careful restraint upon one another in their conventicles."[3] Freedom and responsibility are realized in serving God and neighbor and in responding to their evaluations and corrections. The responsible and decision-making life "is life in relations to companions; it is I-Thou, I-You existence. It is existence in response to action upon us by other selves."[4] It is response to "God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God"; therefore it must be universal and redemptive;[5] and this implies an increase rather than a decrease in human responsibility. In sum, the sovereignty of God releases man from lonely self-defensiveness, reconciles him to his true self as citizen, and leads him into the responsibilities of life.

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[1] Ibid., p. 95.

[2] Ibid., p. 96, quoting the Savoy Declaration and the Westminster Confession.

[3] Ibid., p. 96.

[4] The Responsible Self, pp. 76, 142-45, and 163.

[5] "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," pp. 117ff.

The second misconception of the "God of the gaps" theology concerns the nature of God's sovereignty. William Hamilton describes his previous neo-orthodox understanding of the God-man relationship as an "Oedipal" understanding.[1] In "Oedipal theology," the sovereignty of God implies man's submissive dependence in certain areas of life where only God can solve his problems for him. A major factor in Hamilton's decision to become radical was his being stunned by the force of his realization that he could not fence off a "spiritual" area of man's life where he could solve all human problems better in the name of God than a good psychiatrist could.[2]

We have already noticed T. J. J. Altizer's understanding of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility as mutually exclusive. He sees God as eternal in such a time-negating sense that his rule must always negate temporal man. Altizer writes that in Barth's theology "God's Yes--can only appear as an ultimate No to sinful, autonomous and 'religious' man; for Barth grounded his position in Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity."[3] Similarly, Hamilton pictures neo-orthodox man as "a sort of holding on by the fingernails to the cliff of faith, a standing terrified before the enemy-God, present to man as terror or threat, comforting only in that he kept us from the worse terrors of life without him."[1] The basis of Oedipal theology is a sense of sin, its mood and its activity are the introspection and indecisiveness of a Hamlet, and it is consigned to a hated father and a loveless world.[2] Hamilton calls for the death of Oedipal neo-orthodox theology and its god, and for the taking up of responsible selfhood by man.

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[1] Hamilton and Altizer, _Radical Theology and the Death of God_, pp. 35 and 42ff.

[2] William Hamilton, "The Shape of a Radical Theology," _Christian Century_, LXXXII (October 6, 1965), 1219.

[3] Hamilton and Altizer, _Radical Theology and the Death of God_, p. 104.

By now it should be clear that Niebuhr never adopted a cliff-hanging faith in an aloof God who prefers submissive dependence. From 1929 to 1932, when Niebuhr understood Barth to be saying something of the sort that Hamilton and Altizer have described, he rejected Barth.[3] What Niebuhr means when he affirms the sovereignty of God is not aloofness and negation, but living presence and powerful faithfulness. God is the powerful and faithful ruler of all creation. Therefore man need not fear creation as if it were arbitrary chaos or impersonal fate. Man need not submit to fatalism; he can respond to life with the hope and the purpose that are essential ingredients of responsibility.[4] God is always independent and never the possession of any organization, program, or creed.[5] Therefore man need not be submissive before any authoritarian structure or status quo. Man's proper response to the living God is always transformation of the status quo, always permanent revolution, always creative responsibility.[1] God is ever new and dynamic; His rule is not like the rule of a machine but like the rule of a person, like Jesus Christ.[2] Therefore the fitting response of the disciple is not the irresponsible blindness of a cog in a machine. Nor is his fitting response the mechanical observation of the letter of a dead law. The disciple follows a living action, always new, and his life is the responsibility of alertness, attentiveness, and freedom.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 35.

[2] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

[3] See above, p. 155. It may be significant that Hamilton and Altizer's description of neo-orthodoxy refers almost solely to the Romerbrief and to the "No!" of the early Barth, and never to the constructive theological and ethical writings of Church Dogmatics or The Humanity of God. Since about 1931 Barth has moved in a direction almost opposite to the one Hamilton and Altizer describe.

[4] Christ and Culture, pp. 251ff. Cf. Sam Keen, "Hope in a Posthuman Era," Christian Century, LXXXIV (January 25, 1967), 106-09.

[5] Kingdom of God in America, pp. xiii-xiv.

Dynamic Sovereignty and Responsible Transformationism

We have been examining the connection between the sovereignty of God and active human responsibility. We have examined the issue of Christian responsibility for the transformation of society and culture. But so far we have not referred extensively to the book that concentrates on this issue, *Christ and Culture*. One reason for this was our desire to focus on the historical evidence that Niebuhr points to in The Kingdom of God in America. Another reason was our desire to demonstrate, without referring to Christ and Culture, that Niebuhr consistently prefers an ethic of transformationism and links it with the sovereignty of God. If we now turn to Christ and Culture, and examine it with the sovereignty of God in mind, we can see how decisively he prefers transformationism there as well.[1]

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[1] *Ibid*., pp. 66 and 129f.

[2] *Responsible Self*, pp. 172ff.

[3] *Kingdom of God in America*, p. 175. Cf. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, pp. 78-78, 110, and 241ff., for an intriguing struggle with the same issue. See also his *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility*, chap. ii *et passim*. Cox acknowledges that Niebuhr has been a powerful influence on his thought (*God's Revolution*, p. 10), and much of what he says on sovereignty and responsibility moves in the direction here indicated.

Furthermore, from this perspective the ethical relevance of the sovereignty of God stands out brilliantly. Niebuhr shows how fundamental and determinative the doctrine of God is for Christian ethics. The issues that are faced by the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, have to be faced by every ethic, whether explicitly or implicitly. When an ethic seeks to avoid these issues, serious problems result.

The first two ethical types that Niebuhr describes in Christ and Culture, radical withdrawal and cultural accommodationism, are on the same general level. They are extremes, they ignore basic imperatives, and Niebuhr criticizes them forcefully.

In the position of radical withdrawal, or Christ-against-culture, we recognize the monastic otherworldliness of Niebuhr's early article, "Back to Benedict?".[2] The strength of radical withdrawal is its emphasis on obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As Radical Christians we withdraw to a realm where we actually practice what we profess: absolute loyalty to the concrete revelation in Jesus Christ. "We seem to be proving to ourselves and others that we mean what we say when we say that Jesus Christ is our Lord."[1] But on the other two principles involved in the sovereignty of God, the radicals are weak. Although they maintain the independence from culture that the accommodationists lose,[2] they forget that God is independent judge not only of culture but of themselves, their wills, and their churches. They are too ready to assume that God is on their side against culture and is dependent on their legalistic obedience.[3] Moreover, they tend to forget the reality of God's rule over all things--including over those who are not among the select few.[4] Niebuhr's Trinitarian concern is obvious as he insists repeatedly on the oneness of Jesus Christ with "the Creator of nature and Governor of history," and with "the Spirit immanent in creation and in the Christian community."[5] He criticizes the radical Christians for trying to ignore the problem with which the doctrine of the Trinity deals. They cannot escape the problem "when, in their concentration on the Lordship of Christ, they seek to defend his authority, to define the content of his commandment, and to relate his law or reign to that power which governs nature and presides over the destinies of men in their secular societies."[6] Radicals are tempted to "an ontological bifurcation of reality," of reason and revelation, of the fellowship between Christians and the world.[7]

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[1] Niebuhr's preference for transformationism in Christ and Culture has not been completely clear to many of his reviewers, as we shall see in our next chapter.

[2] See above, pp. 113ff.

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[1] Christ and Culture, p. 66.

[2] Ibid., p. 68.

[3] Ibid., pp. 71, 78-79.

[4] Ibid., pp. 71, 80-81.

[5] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

[6] Ibid., p. 81.

[7] Ibid., pp. 71, 76-77, and 81.

"Ultimately they are tempted to divide the world into the material realm governed by a principle opposed to Christ and a spiritual realm guided by the spiritual God."[1] The result is often "a spiritualism that leads them away from the principle with which they begin, namely Christ's authority."[2]

In the position of accommodationism, or Christ-of-culture, we recognize the Culture-Protestantism that Niebuhr condemned in The Church Against the World.[3] Culture-Protestantism feeds on reaction against radical Christianity just as the latter has its strongest reason for existence in the need to counter the former.[4] We have already suggested that these two positions battle one another more like siblings than strangers. They are basically similar, children of the same moral idealism, both lax in opposing and transforming cultural evils. In Christ and Culture, Niebuhr says accommodationists are like radicals in affirming the centrality of Jesus and in seeing him as a revealer of moral truths, a lawgiver.[5] They are both confident of man's ability to accept Jesus' ideals and to live them, and they do not tarry long over the proclamation of the universality of man's sin and the universality of man's need for forgiveness.[6] This lack of a sense of universal sin and grace, combined with a tendency to alter the gospel to fit the culture, leads the accommodationist to fail the test of independence. The gospel becomes so identified with an aspect of culture, and so dressed up to fit cultural values, that the independence of God from human values is either forgotten or intentionally repressed.[1] This means that accommodationism scores low on the test of specific biblical-revelatory content. Accommodationists "show a consistent tendency to distort the figure of the New Testament Jesus," to make him "agree with the interests or needs of their time."[2] They do succeed in proclaiming the gospel's universality, but they proclaim more the universality of a partial feature of the gospel than of "the Lord of all life, . . . the Father who is the present Creator and Governor of all things."[3] The practical relevance of the Trinitarian problem becomes obvious again, Niebuhr concludes.[4] The accommodationist always tends "to identify Jesus with the immanent divine spirit that works in men. But then the question arises what the relation of this immanent, rational, spiritual, and moral principle is to nature and to the power that produces and governs it."[5] The accommodationist

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[1] Ibid., p. 81.

[2] Ibid., p. 82.

[3] See chap. v above, pp. 129f., et passim. Culture-Protestantism is explicitly identified as a Christ-of-culture position on pp. 84, 91ff., 94, 102, and 107 of Christ and Culture.

[4] Ibid., pp. 68, 101-02, 106, and 110.

[5] Ibid., pp. 86-88, 90, and 113.

[6] Ibid., pp. 110-13.

> raises at last the anxious question whether God exists, whether the value-judgments religious and moral man makes are also judgments about existence. For he cannot escape the problem of cultural and ethical life: whether there is any agreement between the power manifest in earthquake and fire and the one which speaks

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[1] *Ibid*., pp. 88, 108, and 113-14.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 109. See also pp. 86-90, 108-10, and 120.

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 88-89, and 103-08.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 110 and 114.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 114.

> in the still, small, inner voice; whether that which transcends man as he confronts nature is pitiless and blind force, or the Father of Jesus Christ. The relation of Jesus Christ to the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth is ultimately no speculative question for the man concerned with the conservation of culture, but his fundamental problem.[1]

Niebuhr's analysis of the five types of relation between Christ and culture moves to a new level when it leaves behind the radicals and accommodationists, and turns to the remaining three types. These three are "the great majority movement in Christianity, which we may call the church of the center."[2] This "church of the center" seems to take the sovereignty of God more seriously than do the first two types. "For it the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world, important as that issue is, but between God and man."[3] Therefore both the absolute division that the radicals make, and the removal of prophetic tension that the accommodationists accept, are rejected by the central movement. For one thing, the church of the center emphasizes (against the radicals) that "Jesus Christ is the son of God, the Father Almighty who created heaven and earth."[4] This means that all nature and culture are "good and rightly ordered by the One to whom Jesus Christ is obedient and with whom he is inseparably united." Therefore, "Christ and the world cannot be simply opposed to each other. Neither can the 'world' as culture be simply regarded as the realm of godlessness."[1] We recognize once again the first principle of the sovereignty of God, the reality of His rule over all things. Niebuhr continues by announcing a second point of consensus for the church of the center. This second point concerns a particular kind of concreteness in the nature of God and of man's obedience, a God-revealed-in-Christ concreteness:

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[1] Ibid., pp. 114-15. The perceptive character of this analysis is beautifully demonstrated by the theology of T. J. J. Altizer, who began absolutely pro-modern and anti-gnostic, and has now become a gnostic spiritualist in his eschatology. As Niebuhr diagnosed the problem in advance, for such a gnostic the relation of Jesus Christ to the Creator is indeed a life-and-death question. Cf. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian Atheism, pp. 76, 84, 96-97, 110, 118, 127-28, and 146-47.

[2] Christ and Culture, p. 117.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

> There is agreement, too, among all the central groups that man is obligated in the nature of his being to be obedient to God—not to a Jesus separated from the Almighty Creator, nor to an author of nature separate from Jesus Christ, but to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God—and that this obedience must be rendered in the concrete, actual life of natural, cultural man.[2]

The third point of consensus is, of course, the independence of God, and the "universality and radical nature of sin. . . . Men cannot find in themselves, as persons or as communities, a holiness which can be possessed."[3] Niebuhr points out a fourth conviction common to the churches of the center. This fourth conviction is a direct affirmation of the point that we have been making: full human responsibility in all realms of life is grounded not on human autonomy in the absence of God, but on obedient response to the active presence of God. Human responsibility and divine sovereignty belong together.

> The Christians of the center all recognize the primacy of grace and the necessity of works of obedience; though their analyses vary of the relation of man's love of the brothers to that action of divine love which is always first. They cannot separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, for all those works are possible only by grace. But neither can they separate the

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 118.

[3] Ibid.

experience of grace from cultural activity; for how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society?[1]

The first type that Niebuhr analyzes within the central group is that of "synthesis," or "Christ above culture," characteristic of medieval scholasticism.[2] The synthesist more clearly than anyone else affirms the reality of God's rule over all things, over nature and culture as well as the church.[3] Furthermore, the synthesist is convinced that the Creator of nature is the same Lord whose character we discern in Jesus Christ.[4] But the ethic of the synthesist does not score so well when the test of God's independence from human values is applied. A basic assumption of this ethic is the goodness and permanence of one particular cultural understanding. This assumption is the keystone in its structure, a structure built by the permanent interlocking of the gospel and one cultural perspective as in the Thomistic-Aristotelian synthesis. The gospel is no longer independent but cemented to a relative culture. The synthesist comes close to absolutizing a relative culture and tying down the living God.[5]

Similarly, the next group, the dualist or the Christ-and-culture-in-paradox type, by which he refers to Luther, is given excellent grades by Niebuhr on two counts but is failed on a third. Dualists are strongest on the independence of the living God,[6] strong on the manifestation of God's work in Christ,[1] but weak on the universality of God's creative rule.[2]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 120ff.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 122 and 143.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 131 and 142-43.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 145-47.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 150-52, 156-57, 172, and 185-86.

The conversionist or Christ-transforming-culture type is the last one that Niebuhr presents. Just as his analysis moves to a second level when it turns to "the church of the center," it moves to a third level when it turns to transformationism. This is true in a number of different ways. For example, Niebuhr criticizes the synthesist on the issue of independence and the dualist on the issue of universality. In the midst of both of these criticisms, he asserts that if the weakness were corrected then the result would be transformationism.[3] Furthermore, it is significant that he makes no criticisms of transformationism, while he does of all the other positions. What he actually says about transformationism amounts to an endorsement by all three of the tests that he applies to the other types. It is true that he stops just short of stating explicitly that this is the best and highest type. But if one keeps the three principles of the sovereignty of God in mind, the principles by which Niebuhr evaluates the other four types, one can see that the description of transformationism or conversionism amounts to something like an endorsement.[4]

"The conversionists' understanding of the relations of Christ and culture is most closely akin to dualism." Like the dualists, they see the universal pervasiveness of sin more clearly than synthesists. "They note that it is deeply rooted in the human soul, that it pervades all man's work, and that there are no gradations of corruption, however various its symptoms."[1] Therefore they are more free from the danger that synthesists fall into—the danger of absolutizing one relative culture and thereby losing the independence of the gospel. They "discern how all cultural work in which men promote their own glory, whether individualistically or socially, whether as members of the nation or of humanity, lies under the judgment of God."[2] Conversionists, then, make the same needed correction of the synthesists that the dualists make.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 150 and 185-86.

[2] Ibid., pp. 158-59 and 187ff.

[3] Ibid., pp. 145-47 and 188-89.

[4] Though the last chapter refuses to say, "This is the answer." Ibid., pp. 231f. We shall discuss Niebuhr's last chapter in our next chapter.

Dualists, on the other hand, come under Niebuhr's criticism for their failure to attend to the universality of God's rule. This weakness, too, is thoroughly corrected by conversionists. "What distinguishes conversionists from dualists is their more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture. Their more affirmative stand seems to be closely connected with three theological convictions."[3] Each of these convictions concerns the reality of God's rule over all of life—over nature, fallen man, and history.

The first theological conviction has to do with the continuing creating activity of God. Whereas the dualist underestimates the importance of creation and nature, for the conversionist

> the creative activity of God and of Christ-in-God is a major theme. . . . Hence man the creature, working in a created world,

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 191.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*.

> lives, as the conversionist sees it, under the rule of Christ and by the creative power and ordering of the divine Word, even though in his unredeemed mind he may believe that he lives among vain things under divine wrath. To be sure, the dualist often also says something like this; but he tends to qualify it so much by references to God's anger as peculiarly manifest in the physical world that the beneficence of the Ruler of nature becomes somewhat doubtful.[1]

The result of the conversionist's theology is a fuller sense of human responsibility to God-in-Christ in the midst of the whole created world. "He finds room for affirmative and ordered response on the part of created man to the creative, ordering work of God."[2]

The second theological conviction has to do with the fall. "As we have noted, dualism often brings creation and fall into such close proximity that it is tempted to speak . . . as if creation of finite selfhood or matter involved fall."[3] Consequently, dualists "tend to think of the institutions of culture as having largely a negative function in a temporal and corrupt world. They are orders for corruption, preventives of anarchy, . . . concerned wholly with temporal matters."[4] The conversionist agrees that man and his culture are radically fallen. But though fallen, they are still God's possession, God's realm, and not the devil's. The conversionist sees fallen culture as "perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion, and not as badness of being."[5] The corruption is deep, but there is still hope. "The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation; though the conversion is so radical that it amounts to a kind of rebirth."[1]

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[1] _Ibid_., p. 192.

[2] _Ibid_.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 193.

[4] _Ibid_., pp. 193-94.

[5] _Ibid_., p. 194.

The third conviction characteristic of the conversionist is "a view of history that holds that to God all things are possible in a history that is fundamentally not a course of merely human events but always a dramatic interaction between God and men."[2] God is Lord, Creator and Redeemer, in history now. "The eschatological future has become . . . an eschatological present."[3] Thus the conversionist himself is thrust into active responsibility in present historical events. He "is less concerned with conservation of what has been given in creation, less with preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the divine possibility of a present renewal."[4]

Finally, it is the conversionist who takes the Lordship of Christ most seriously. This is the reason that Niebuhr chooses F. D. Maurice as "the most consistent of conversionists"—because he "held fast to the principle that Christ was king."[5] The transformation that the ruler of the universe effects would be an empty and shapeless process if that ruler were not fundamentally redemptive, as revealed in Christ. Jesus Christ as king is not merely the ideal of humanity but the disclosure of the character of the actual ruler of the actual world. F. D. Maurice

> begins with the fact that the Christ who comes into the world

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[1] _Ibid_.

[2] _Ibid_.

[3] _Ibid_., p. 195.

[4] _Ibid_.

[5] _Ibid_., pp. 224 and 229.

> comes into his own, and that it is Christ himself who exercises his kingship over men, not a vicegerent—whether pope, Scriptures, Christian religion, church, or inner light—separate from the incarnate Word. . . . Christ is Lord of mankind whether men believe it or not.[1]

This means that Christ, not sin, is "the ruling principle of existence" and the basis for Christian ethics.[2] Maurice therefore "took issue with the Evangelicals in Germany and England, for they 'seem to make sin the ground of all theology.'"[3] "Christocentric theocentrism" is not an elliptical phrase for the conversionist, because it is in Christ that we see God, and the God who is sovereign is the One faithful Lord revealed in Christ. For Maurice,

> the center is Christ. In him all things were created to live in union with God and each other; he reveals the true nature of life and the law of the created society as well as the sin and rebellion of its members; he redeems men in and for community with one another in God.[4]

"The time of the conflict is now; the time of Christ's victory is now."[5] For Maurice as for all conversionists, the kingship is real now, so the responsibility of man is real now.

> This kingdom is real, for if God did not rule nothing would exist; and if He had not heard the prayer for the coming of the kingdom, the world of mankind would long ago have become a den of robbers. Every moment and period is an eschatological present, for in every moment men are dealing with God.[6]

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 220.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 224.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 221.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 228.

[6] *Ibid*., pp. 228-29.

PART THREE

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AS NORMATIVE PATTERN FOR RESPONSIBLE ACTION

CHAPTER VIII

THE ETHICS OF RESPONSE IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONALISM AND WAR

> The interpretation of the situation as a locus of divine action may have a great deal to do with our motive and energy for action, but I do not see that it provides any short-cut to wisdom concerning what we should decide to do. To determine what God is doing in the situation is no easier than it is to decide what we should do though exhortations of this kind often seem to assume that what God is doing is an obvious matter. There is a danger that we may identify God's action with the apparent "wave of the future" or that we will be determined by authoritarian religious criteria.[1]

In his presidential address to the American Society of Christian Social Ethics in 1961, John Bennett pointed out that Barth and Bonhoeffer and all contextualists need and explicitly use principles.[2] Dr. Bennett has also pointed out that H. Richard Niebuhr and James Gustafson are no exceptions; they explicitly use principles in their contextual ethics.[3]

James Gustafson agrees. In an article that goes to the root of the "context versus principles" debate and analyzes the ethical methods of the major contemporary Protestant ethicists, Gustafson shows with care and precision that the debate is misplaced.

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[1] John Bennett, "Ethical Principles and the Context," _Yearbook of the American Society of Christian Social Ethics_ (1960:1961), p. 12.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 11-12.

[3] Statement made to the writer in private conversation.

> The debate between context and principles, then, forces an unfair polarization upon a diversity of opinion that makes it both academically unjust, and increasingly morally fruitless. Persons assigned to either pole are there for very different reasons, and work under the respective umbrellas in very different ways. It also becomes clear that contextualists find some moral principles or generalizations that give guidance to existential decisions, and that the defenders of principles find some ways to proceed from generalizations to particular situations.[1]

The question then is not whether H. Richard Niebuhr's ethics of response uses principles. The question is what kinds of principles he rejects and why he rejects them, and what kinds of principles he affirms and why he affirms them.

Gustafson suggests that there are three sorts of reasons for contextualism in Christian ethics, and that different contextualists arrive at their positions for different reasons. Some are contextualists for reasons of social realism; they are concerned for "accurate analysis of what is actually taking place in the world in which Christians act so that their moral conduct can be more realistic and responsible." Kenneth Underwood is an example.[2] Others are contextualists for theological reasons, as in the case of Karl Barth, Joseph Sittler, and the most radical contextualist, Paul Lehmann.[3] "Clearly Barth is not arguing for a 'contextualism' on the grounds of a social realism as in the case of Underwood. Behind this . . . there is a whole doctrine of God who is for man in Jesus Christ, who is free, who is living and present to men in faith in the world."[1] Third, there are those who are contextualists because of their analysis of human selfhood. "Ethics is contextual because persons live in a pattern of human relations which inevitably make moral responsibility a particular response to persons or events."[2] Gustafson puts Richard Niebuhr in this category, although he acknowledges that Niebuhr's position "is also authorized by an interpretation of theology."[3]

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[1] James M. Gustafson, "Context Versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics," Harvard Theological Review, LVIII (April, 1965), 192. Bennett commends Gustafson's article and states: "I agree that the debate is misplaced in the sense that neither of the two positions is really self-sufficient." John Bennett, Foreign Policy in Christian Perspective (New York, 1966), p. 39.

[2] Gustafson, "Context Versus Principles," p. 176.

[3] Ibid., pp. 177-79.

Actually, Niebuhr is a contextualist for all three sorts of reasons. We have already noticed his advocacy of contextualism and realism on theological grounds. He attacked the value-theory definition of God as an ideal or as a corollary of value, and he adopted a theological realism and an ethical contextualism based on the sovereignty of God. This came long before his analysis of responsible selfhood.[4] Also we have already noticed that Niebuhr advocated contextualism as superior to idealism on the grounds of social realism. This came in the period just after the publication of The Social Sources of Denominationalism, simultaneously with Niebuhr's rediscovery of the sovereignty of God.[5] Thus once more we see that the sovereignty of God, realistic transformation of society and culture, and responsible selfhood belong together in Niebuhr's thought. Similarly, in The

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[1] Ibid., p. 178.

[2] Ibid., p. 183.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See chapters i, ii, and v-vii above.

[5] See chapters v and vi above.

Responsible Self, Niebuhr advocates an ethics of response for all three sorts of reasons: theological authenticity, social realism, and the nature of human selfhood.[1] But Gustafson is certainly right, especially in indicating the difference between Niebuhr and Barth, when he points out that "Niebuhr does not seek to derive his anthropology from his doctrine of God. He is perfectly willing to find it in the common human experience as this was reconstructed in quite secular thinkers such as G. H. Mead, C. H. Cooley, Josiah Royce, and others, as well as theologians such as Buber."[2]

Niebuhr prefers the term, "ethics of response," to contextualism.[3] This preference symbolizes the inseparability of the responding self and the Sovereign to whom he is responding.[4] Niebuhr agrees with the dominant emphasis in modern psychology, social science, and history that decisions are influenced less by one's ideals than by one's understanding of what is actually happening.[5] And as we have seen, God's sovereignty takes place not merely in an ideal realm but in what is actually happening. God is where the decisions are; God and human responsibility belong together. Gustafson says it clearly:

> The effect of this understanding of selfhood is the delineation of an ethics that seeks to define and do what is fitting and appropriate in the particular relationships of the self. For Christians the interpretation of the situation involves an understanding of what God is saying and doing there. "Responsibility affirms—God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action." The Christian community acts not only in response to the natural and historical

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1. Responsible Self, pp. 56ff. et passim.

2. Gustafson, "Context Versus Principles," p. 185.

3. Ibid., p. 185.

4. Responsible Self, pp. 56-57.

5. Ibid., p. 57.

> context of its life, but in the light of a particular interpretation and understanding of that very particular context, namely what God is saying and doing there. Thus Niebuhr moves with ease between a view of the nature of man's moral existence to a view of the nature of God's being and presence as an active one. The two are coherent and congenial with each other. . . .[1]

Niebuhr himself has written the introduction to his ethics of response.[2] James Gustafson has provided two definitive analyses of Niebuhr's ethics, both of which explain how the character of God's action as perceived in faith guides ethical action.[3] Waldo Beach has shown how Niebuhr's ethics of response illuminates race relations, and how the sovereignty of God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer forms the basis of that ethics.[4] Each of these is a sound presentation. Rather than repeat their analyses, we shall simply assume their familiarity or accessibility to the reader.

One sort of investigation does remain, however, which may still be worthwhile. We can ask how Niebuhr's ethics of response has served him by providing images for understanding and guidelines for action in a particular area of ethical concern. We can choose an area of concern on which Niebuhr has focused repeatedly and investigate his procedure as it is actually demonstrated in his writings. The most

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1. Gustafson, "Context Versus Principles," pp. 184-85. Gustafson's quote is from The Responsible Self, p. 126.

2. The Responsible Self.

3. "Introduction," The Responsible Self, pp. 6-41; "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," Faith and Ethics, pp. 119-39.

4. Waldo Beach, "A Theological Analysis of Race Relations," Faith and Ethics, pp. 205-24. E. Clinton Gardner's Biblical Faith and Social Ethics (New York, 1960), summarizes much of Niebuhr's lectures in his Christian Ethics course. On the shape of the redeeming action, however, it departs from Niebuhr and sounds more like George Thomas.

suitable area would be denominationalism, the Church, the ministry, and theological education, because this is the concern toward which he has directed most of his energies. But this would be far too extensive for present limitations. More manageable areas of concern that are repeated in Niebuhr's writings are the nature of selfhood, capitalism and communism, economic ethics, nationalism and internationalism, peace and war. Because of urgent present needs, the combined area of nationalism and internationalism, peace and war, may be the most important. Therefore we turn to Niebuhr's writings in this area to ask what sort of principles, or images for understanding, or guidelines for decision Niebuhr uses and advocates as he writes about nations, war, and peace.

The Early 1930's: Impending War as Judgment

We have already observed how Niebuhr condemned the church's accommodation to national divisions in the period of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, before 1930.[1] This was his period of ethical idealism. He saw nationalism as a powerful social force, and an evil one. Nationalism was the direct opposite of the love for all mankind and the sense of human solidarity that Jesus taught.[2] It was so powerful and so divisive that it led Niebuhr almost to despair.

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[1] Chapter v above.

[2] Chapter v above. As early as 1921, Niebuhr published an article which included praise for the ideal of internationalism and condemnation for the worldliness of "a spirit of narrow nationalism and racial prejudice." Niebuhr, "The Alliance Between Labor and Religion," *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America*, XLIX (May, 1921), 200-02.

Then during the early 1930's, Niebuhr became disillusioned with the teleological ethics of idealism, and he began to develop his ethics of response. His writings show that he was still wrestling with disillusionment and despair, and that his constructive alternative was still at a beginning stage of development. During this formative period the two Niebuhr brothers engaged in a published debate with one another, their first and their last one.[1]

This debate was a turning point in American intellectual history. Both brothers simultaneously disembarked from American liberal idealism. Both simultaneously revealed for the first time the new direction of travel which they then continued to follow throughout their careers. On March 23, 1932, Richard disclosed for the first time his new line of march guided by the sovereignty of God. He had previously criticized liberal moral idealism for its subjectivism, individualism, optimism, and impotence, but this was his first announcement of his constructive alternative. One week later, Reinhold disclosed his break with liberal idealism, with the social gospel, and with pacifism. He stated his alternative: a dialectical tension between the normative ideal realm of sacrificial love and the pragmatic political realm of power and self-interest.[2]

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," The Christian Century, XLIX (March 23, 1932), 378-80. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?" Ibid. (March 30, 1932), 415-17. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," Ibid. (April 6, 1932), 447.

[2] John Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York, 1961), pp. 63-65; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life," Kegley and Bretall, op. cit., pp. 134-35. Reinhold's

As Arthur Schlesinger explains, at this time liberal idealism ruled American political thought. It was widely believed that men and society were essentially mild, good, and reasonable, and would in time gradually overcome the cultural lag between the actual and the ideal.

> The Kingdom of God was thus identical with historical progress. Neither egoism in man nor power in society need be serious obstacles; they could be by-passed by following the path of love in human relations, of non-violence in political relations, and of pacifism in international relations. For most of the Social Gospel, the onward march of democratic idealism would assure the Kingdom. For the radical minority, the Kingdom was the classless society of Marxist anticipation, to be won by the tramping hosts of labor.[1]

On January 2nd, 1932, the last of the Chinese armies in Manchuria was defeated by the Japanese. The Japanese armed forces were under military rule rather than civilian rule. The Japanese cabinet collapsed, and a more militaristic cabinet took over. Toward the end of January, the Japanese Navy bombarded Shanghai and occupied it until late March, when they withdrew under a truce worked out by the League of Nations.[2]

It was in response to this situation--American idealism and Japanese militarism--that the Niebuhr brothers engaged in their only published debate. The uniqueness of this "fraternal war" has increased its interest, and recently it has been republished by Harry K. Girvetz

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fuller development of these new departures came in the same year in his Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York, 1932).

[1] Schlesinger, p. 129.

[2] Paul H. Clyde, The Far East: A History of the Impact of the West on Eastern Asia (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1958), pp. 555-59.

in readily accessible form.[1] It requires close study lest it be misunderstood.

Richard Niebuhr wrote the first essay in the debate, "The Grace of Doing Nothing." Girvetz introduces this essay: "In the following selection Richard Niebuhr defends an ethics of disinterestedness--contending that the true Christian will, qua Christian, be inactive in the presence of social injustice."[2] But this misses the real point of the debate.

Richard's point is not to argue for inactivity.[3] He is writing about a situation in which "we seem to be condemned to doing nothing," in order to wrestle with the intriguing ethical question, "How shall we do nothing?"[4]

The central question in the debate, as early as 1932, is the central question for Richard's ethics of response: How are we to interpret what is going on in the situation? He describes four alternative responses to the situation of being condemned to inactivity. The difference between the alternatives is in their interpretation of the situation.

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[1] Harry K. Girvetz (ed.), Contemporary Moral Issues (Belmont, California, 1963), pp. 321-33. Cf. also Harold E. Fey and Margaret Frakes (eds.), The Christian Century Reader (New York, 1962), pp. 216ff.

[2] Girvetz, p. 321.

[3] "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," p. 331 in Girvetz.

[4] Girvetz, p. 321. When we recall that Richard Niebuhr's ethic is situational or contextual, Girvetz's introductory statement is puzzling: "That the disagreement was provoked by events which seem in these troubled times to have occurred a thousand years ago--Japan's pre-war aggressions in China--makes no difference." (p. 321). On the contrary, the situation Niebuhr is examining is precisely the sort of situation in which it seems impossible to do anything and we are condemned to some sort of stewing or fretting. The point is that Richard began with a particular situation in which America did seem to have its hands tied, and the question was what to do in the meantime. He was not advocating inactivity, but asking how to live with inactivity when it is necessary.

First there is the interpretation of the pessimist and the conservative. "He believes that the way of Japan is the way of all nations, that self-interest is the first and only law of life, and that out of the clash of national, as out of that of individual, self-interests the greater good will result."[1] His response fits his interpretation: He waits "for the opportunity when, in precisely similar manner . . . he may rush to the protection of his own interests or promote them by taking advantage of the situation created by the strife of his competitors."[2]

Second is the pacifist. Richard seems to agree with the belief of the pacifist that at least in this case "forcible interference . . . would only increase the flow of blood and the hatred."[3] But the crucial point in the pacifist interpretation of the situation is that he "knows of nothing else that he can do" besides forcible interference and so his "righteous indignation mounts and mounts, and must issue at last . . . either in his own forcible entry into the conflict, despite his scruples, or in apoplexy."[4] It is this lack of an alternate program and the consequent moral indignation that Richard's essay is mainly concerned to correct or exorcise.

> The diatribes against Japan which are appearing in the secular and religious press today have a distressing similarity to the

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 322.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 322-23.

> righteously indignant utterances which preceded our conflicts with Spain and with Germany . . . . And the pacifists who have no other program than that of abstention from the unrighteousness of war are likely to be placed in the same quandary . . . . Righteous indignation not allowed to issue in action is a dangerous thing—as dangerous as any great emotion nurtured and repressed at the same time. It is the source of sudden explosions or the ground of long, bitter and ugly wounds.[1]

The third way, the way of the Communists, offers more hope. They "see that there is indeed nothing constructive to be done in the present situation, but that, rightly understood, this situation is after all preliminary to a radical change which will eliminate the conditions of which the conflict is a product."[2] Therefore their response is one of hope. Their energy can be devoted to "the slow laborious process of building up within the fighting groups those cells of communism which will be ready to inherit the new world."[3]

The fourth way is the way of the sovereignty of God. In 1932, the ethical significance of this new faith is already clear and strong even though it is not yet completely freed from idealism. This fourth way "rests on the well-nigh obsolete faith that there is a God—a real God."[4] The creating, governing, and redeeming activity of God is not merely a past event or a future ideal but the dominant force in present events.

> Those who follow this way share with communism the belief that the fact that men can do nothing constructive is no indication

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[1] Ibid., p. 323.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. In 1932, Richard's brother Reinhold was more influenced by the Marxist understanding of the class struggle than at any other time in his career, according to John Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," p. 65.

[4] Girvetz, p. 323.

> . . . that nothing constructive is being done. Like the Communists they are assured that the actual processes of history will inevitably and really bring a different kind of world with lasting peace. They do not rely on human aspirations after ideals to accomplish this end, but on forces which often seem very impersonal—as impersonal as those which eliminated slavery in spite of abolitionists. The forces may be as impersonal and as actual as machine production, rapid transportation, the physical mixtures of races, etc., but as parts of the real world they are as much a part of the total divine process as are human thoughts and prayers.[1]

Richard Niebuhr describes the shape of the divine process as both judgment and redemption. This dialectic produces an interpretation of what is going on that is realistic; it has no reason to minimize limitations and disastrous tendencies in the present process of events. Judgment is real. At the same time, however, and this is what Niebuhr is emphasizing, this dialectic of judgment and redemption provides good reason to prepare hopefully for the future. The central point is this: the Judge is also the Redeemer. The Judge is now working to redeem the world through revolutionary change in the present crisis.

> From this point of view, naively affirming the meaningfulness of reality, the history of the world is the judgment of the world and also its redemption, and a conflict like the present one is—again as in communism—only the prelude both to greater judgment and to a new era. The world being what it is, these results are brought forth when the seeds of national or individual self-interest are planted; the actual structure of things is such that our wishes for a different result do not in the least affect the outcome . . . . This inactive Christianity shares with communism also the belief in the inevitably good outcome of the mundane process and the realistic insight that that good cannot be achieved by the slow accretion of better habits alone but more in consequence of a revolutionary change which will involve considerable destruction. While it does nothing it knows that something is being done, something which is divine both in its threat and in its promise.[2]

Reinhold replies by agreeing with most of his brother's analysis of the situation and its limits. "It is true," he writes, "that we have helped to create the Japan which expresses itself in terms of materialistic imperialism. The insult we offered her in our immigration laws was a sin of spiritual aggression."[1] It is true that we are being judged in the present crisis, that we are less than disinterested, and that we ourselves need to repent. "The white world has not only taught her the ways of imperialism, but has pre-empted enough of the yellow man's side of the world to justify Japan's imperialism as a vent for pent-up national energies."[2]

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[1] *Ibid*., pp. 323-24.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 324.

Reinhold's main disagreement concerns the discontinuity between present and future that he sees in Richard's essay.

> What makes my brother's eschatology impossible for me is that he identifies everything that is occurring in history (the drift toward disaster, another world war and possibly a revolution) with the counsels of God, and then suddenly, by a leap of faith, comes to the conclusion that the same God who uses brutalities and forces, against which man must maintain conscientious scruples, will finally establish an ideal society in which pure love will reign.[3]

At this early stage in their development, both brothers define the Biblical ethic as an ethic of purely disinterested love. They both see God ruling in history only where disinterested love rules.[4] Reinhold is saying that such love does not rule in the present, and that it is therefore an ideal for the future beyond history. Richard is saying that such love does already rule in the present, and that it is therefore a real hope within present history.

Richard holds together the judging action of God with the redeeming action of God by understanding them both as the action of disinterested love.

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[1] Ibid., p. 326.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 328.

[4] Ibid., pp. 329 and 331-32.

> That structure of the universe, that will of God, does bring war and depression upon us when we bring it upon ourselves, for we live in the kind of world which visits our iniquities upon us and our children, no matter how much we pray and desire that it be otherwise.
>
> Self-interest acts destructively in this world; it calls forth counter-assertion; nationalism breeds nationalism; class assertion summons up counter-assertion on the part of exploited classes. The result is war, economic, military, verbal; and it is judgment. But this same structure in things which is our enemy is our redeemer . . . History is not a perennial tragedy but a road to fulfilment and that fulfilment requires the tragic outcome of every self-assertion, for it is fulfilment which can only be designated as "love."[1]

When Richard says disinterest rules, he does not mean love is the chief characteristic of political relations, but that self-assertiveness in politics causes destruction. "This is not a faith in progress, for evil grows as well as good, and every self-assertion must be eliminated somewhere and somehow--by innocence suffering for guilt, it seems."[2]

Both Niebuhrs are attacking the idealistic and sentimental belief in progress. For Reinhold, this takes the form of denying that the redemptive kingdom of God (i.e., the establishment of disinterested love as the dominant characteristic of all human relations) is a present reality. The kingdom of God is a future ideal. So when he hears his brother Richard speak of redemption in history, he can not believe Richard is referring to present action. Richard must be describing an ideal, an absolute, a utopia for the future, or "a society of pure love."[3] Reinhold seems to think of God almost as ideal rather than real: he describes the world of man as "a place where nature and God, the real and the ideal, meet."[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 331-32.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 332.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 329.

Richard thus retorts: "For my brother God is outside the historical processes, so much so that he charges me with faith in a miracle-working deity which interferes occasionally, sometimes brutally, sometimes redemptively, in this history. But God, I believe, is always in history."[2] Richard thinks of the redeeming action of God in history as a relative process, which is sometimes revolutionary, rather than as a total takeover by a perfect ideal. He uses the more relative terminology of process: "The good outcome of the mundane process," the creation of "the conditions under which a real reconstruction of habits is possible," "the process of healing."[3] He says:

> The society of love is an impossible human ideal, as the fellowship of the organism is an impossible ideal for the cell. It is not an ideal toward which we can strive, but an "emergent," a potentiality in our situation which remains unrealized so long as we try to impose our pattern, our wishes upon the divine creative process.[4]

Yet, Reinhold is right in contending that what Richard expects to emerge within history does have an idealistic quality. Though it may be mixed with some self-assertion, the new emergent is a society of disinterested love. Therefore the appropriate response to the situation as Richard interprets it is not coercion, not political intervention, not self-assertion, but the building of international structures in the church, national repentance, and forgiveness toward Japan.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 331.

[3] Ibid., pp. 328-29.

[4] Ibid., pp. 332-333.

Richard is seeking to exorcise the righteous indignation of moral idealism. Moral idealism claims to have renounced coercion but is threatened with apoplexy because it is condemned to inactivity. He suggests a program of action. This program is meaningful if God is really present in history, working through disaster, revolution, and war, to accomplish something new.

> This inactivity is like that of the early Christians whose millenarian mythology it replaces with the contemporary mythology of social forces. (Mythology is after all not fiction but a deep philosophy.) Like early Christianity and like communism today radical Christianity knows that nothing constructive can be done by interference, but that something very constructive can be done in preparation for the future. It also can build cells of those within each nation who, divorcing themselves from the program of nationalism and of capitalism, unite in a higher loyalty which transcends national and class lines of division and prepare for the future.[1]

Richard advocates more international ecumenical conferences and the formation of a "Christian international." He then points out that there are important differences between this radically Christian program and the Communist program. A major characteristic of the appropriate Christian response to its understanding of the judgment and redemption of God is what "the old Christians called repentance, but the word has become so reminiscent of emotional debauches in the feeling of guilt that it may be better to abandon it for a while."[2]

> So the American Christian realizes that Japan is following the example of his own country and that it has little real ground for believing America to be a disinterested nation. He may see that his country, for which he bears his own responsibility as a citizen, is really not disinterested and that its righteous indignation is not wholly righteous. An activity then is demanded which will be profoundly active in rigid self-analysis.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 324.

[2] Ibid., p. 325.

[3] Ibid.

Besides repentance, forgiveness is the other essential part of the appropriate response.[1]

This response avoids idealism's frantic utopianism. "Man's task is not that of building utopias, but that of eliminating weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness."[2]

But Reinhold does not think Richard has gone far enough. He argues that we can hardly expect "divine intervention to introduce something into history which is irrelevant to anything we find in history now. We may envisage a society in which human co-operation is possible with a minimum amount of coercion, but we cannot imagine one in which there is no coercion at all."[3] Therefore the practical, specific response to Japan's aggression in China may properly involve coercion. Reinhold for the first time is rejecting the pacifist argument:

> We must try to dissuade Japan from her military venture, but must use coercion to frustrate her designs if necessary, must reduce coercion to a minimum and prevent it from issuing in violence, must engage in constant self-analysis in order to reduce the moral conceit of Japan's critics and judges to a minimum, and must try in every social situation to maximize the ethical forces and yet not sacrifice the possibility of achieving an ethical goal because we are afraid to use any but purely ethical means.[4]

We shall see that Richard later modifies his emphasis on disinterested love and his opposition to coercion. His main contentions, however, stand as a permanent foundation for his ethics: the sovereignty of God within history, the unity of God's judgment and redemption, the necessity of repentance for nationalism and of forgiveness toward other nations, the building of international loyalties.[1]

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 331.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 333.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 329.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 330.

In 1934, Richard Niebuhr picks up the theme once more in his essay, "What Then Must We Do?" He speaks again of judgment and says the time of utopian idealism is past.

> We can no longer ask what we must do in order that we may achieve the ideal of a warless world. We must inquire far more desperately and seriously what must be done in order that we may be saved from the storm of war that is even now gathering upon the horizon.[2]

This judgment is tragic because "A new culture, world-wide, peaceful, happy, abundant seems within our reach even now. . . . Never have the bonds of peace been so numerous, the instruments of knowledge so precise, the supplies of food so plentiful, the possibilities of freedom so abounding."[3] But we ourselves and our common life are too sinful to grasp it.[4]

Niebuhr seems more activistic in this essay, contending that we can not view the situation "with patience in the knowledge that tomorrow will give us a greater opportunity."[5] The opportunity for peace is rapidly passing and the alternative "is not simply continued existence on the old basis but disaster."[1] But he interprets the situation more as a crisis of faith than a crisis of justice or of institutions. The response that he advocates is threefold: (1) faith in the "I am that I am" on whom "we are utterly dependent for our being and our meaning," but who is independent of our desires, and who is simultaneously our Judge and our Redeemer; (2) the broad sharing of the profits of our industry; (3) going back to our individual vocations to work quietly with faith, repentance, and hope.[2]

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[1] This debate with his brother must have had a strong and lasting impact on Richard. For example, there is a passage on p. 63 of Robert Lynn's class lecture notes for Richard Niebuhr's Christian Ethics course of 1954-1955 which reproduces this debate with remarkable faithfulness. Richard refers indirectly to Reinhold in terms of the dominance of sin in the economic life and the need for a rough justice, and then repeats his major contentions that we have just observed, except for the non-coercionism.

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, "What Then Must We Do?" pp. 145-46.

[3] Ibid., p. 146.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

The increasing activism is more apparent in an article published the same year criticizing the Fellowship of Reconciliation. All modern, liberal pacifism, Niebuhr says, "has been secondary to moral idealism. The ethics of the movement has been utilitarian, in the sense that pacific means are regarded as a better instrument than violence for the attainment of ideal purposes."[3] But this only aids the cause of war because it is so unrealistic. "These idealists are all so much alike! They believe in the power of the mind over the body to perform any sort of miracle; physical and economic determinism means nothing to them."[4] Richard Niebuhr sounds like his brother Reinhold as he describes the need for coercion in society:

> If we are going to be utilitarians let us be rational utilitarians and accept the principle that what matters is the ideal end and that whatever is necessary for its attainment is right. Let us

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 147.

[3] Niebuhr, "Inconsistency of the Majority," The World Tomorrow, XVII (January 19, 1934), 43.

[4] Ibid.

> also be realistic utilitarians and accept the fact that man is not so spiritual, so free, so rational an animal that he can be dealt with as though he required no coercion. If we are realistic about ourselves we know that that is not true; it is not only love of the good which makes us do our work; the necessity of making our living plays its part. We are not moral men living in immoral societies because the individual is better than the society, but because as individuals we are subject to all sorts of coercions to which societies are not subjected. And if violent coercions are no longer frequently necessary in the case of individuals we shall not believe that this end has been attained without violent coercion in the past. Perhaps it is only because so much violence is at the disposal of society in dealing with the individual that it is not often necessary to employ violence.[1]

The alternative to coercion is not pacifism as the best means to an ideal end, but pacifism "as the type of attitude we see in Jesus." This Christian pacifism "understands that [Jesus] did not say: 'Love your enemy in order that you may convert him to your point of view,' but 'Love your enemies in order that ye may be sons of your Father in heaven.'"[2] This consistent pacifism also understands that Christian reconciliation takes place by the shedding of the blood of the innocent, and that pacifists should seek no exemption from their own bloodshed.[3] Richard Niebuhr leaves the choice with the reader: either social realism of Reinhold's sort or consistent and absolute pacifism. He seems to regard either choice as authentically Christian. His concern is again to attack the righteous indignation of the moral idealist who is a pacifist now but who is actually heating up the human boiler that will explode into war.[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 44.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The matters we have reviewed are aired further in three other pieces appearing about the same time: "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?" is a critique of the provincialism

The 1940's: The Second World War and Justice for the Enemy

In 1942 and 1943, Niebuhr wrote a series of articles about the Christian response to the Second World War. The first is "War as the Judgment of God."[1] Here he maintains that Christians must respond in time of war as at other times only to God: not partly to God and partly to the bad actions of men or national defense against the enemy or the relative rightness of democracy in opposition to totalitarianism. To respond to God and also to our cause is to be ditheists and to create self-righteousness.

Interpreting the war as the judgment of God means three things. First it means "that judgment cannot be separated from redemption, that the harshness of God is not antagonistic to his love but subordinate to it, that divine 'penology' is reconstructive and not vindictive in its nature."[2] The fitting response therefore is to the Redeemer who is active in the midst of the judgment. It is like the response of Isaiah and Jesus when they were faced with Assyrian and Roman. Their response

> was constructive in that it built new community in the midst of tragedy, cleaned selves and society of egoism, fear and hatred,

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of American theology and an argument that German and American theology need one another's correction. "Nationalism, Socialism, and Christianity" is an attack on oversimplified analyses of nationalism and a plea for the independence of the church from nationalism, from socialism, and from capitalism. The Church Against the World is a thorough attack on the captivity of the church to nationalism and a call for the church's declaration of independence. We have also already noticed Niebuhr's interest and comments concerning the Church Struggle in Germany as early as 1932-1934 (chap. vi above).

[1] Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," The Christian Century, LIX (May 13, 1942), 630-33.

[2] Ibid., p. 631.

> and opened up a productive future in which the tragedy was made the foundation of a new life. Had Isaiah simply attended to what the Assyrian was doing or Jesus to what the priests and Pilate were doing, it is difficult to see what constructive results could have followed, had they been never so pacifist or coercionist.[1]

Second, "if God is judging mankind in this war, as he is, there can be no contention before him about the relative rightness or wrongness of the various groups involved."[2] The fitting response therefore is to the independent, living God who is not the possession of any human cause. This is equally true of Hitler and of the United States. "Whether we speak of nations or of movements, we can be as certain in our day as the prophets were in theirs that our thoughts are not his thoughts and our ways are not his ways."[3] Niebuhr concedes that the temptation "to make the self the spokesman of the Eternal is never far from any one of us" and that there may be much more severe trials for us in the future. Then he adds:

> Still, it remains a cause for gratitude that the churches in the warring nations--on both sides--have so far not tended to confuse divine and human judgment as much as they did a generation ago.
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> . . . .
>
> All the Christian groups seem to be resolved to exert all their powers to effect a just peace settlement--a peace which will not be based on the interpretation that only one nation is being judged or that the victors are the judges, but rather on the knowledge that all nations have fallen short of simple justice, not to speak of the glory of God. Hence it is demanded that the peace settlement recognize the necessity of sacrifice on the part of all, the limitation of national sovereignty, the claim of all nations to certain political and economic rights. On this the mind of the churches seems to be unified.[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 630.

[2] Ibid., p. 631.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 630.

Third, the judgment "is the judgment of the one and universal God and not the judgment of a Lord of the spiritual life, or of a Lord of religious life, or of a Christian Lord over Christian life."[1] The fitting response is to the universal Creator of "domestic, political and economic society" and all things.[2] "Hence it is impossible so to separate response to the judgment of God from politically necessary action as to make religious life an affair of repentance while political action remains essentially unrepentant, self-confident action in the defense of our values."[3] Here Niebuhr is moving beyond his anti-coercionist beginnings in 1932 by putting more emphasis on political action, justice, and social structures.[4]

Niebuhr adds three major consequences for human action besides those we have already mentioned. "The first of these is the abandonment of the habit of passing judgments of our own on ourselves and on our enemies or opponents . . . ."[5] Instead we must simply ask what our duty is in view of what God is doing. "If that duty involves, as I believe it does, resistance to those who are abusing our neighbors, we shall not inquire whether our neighbors" are better or more likeable than those who are abusing them. "If injustice is done to totalitarian countries . . . or communist countries or the Jewish people" or if we judge ourselves to have failed to do our duty in the past, all this makes no difference. Our duty is equal justice in all cases, and does not depend on such measurements of relative favor or sinlessness.[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 631.

[2] Ibid., pp. 631-32.

[3] Ibid., p. 632.

[4] Cf. above, pp. 222ff.

[5] "War as the Judgment of God," p. 632.

Second, it means to repent of self-centeredness, self-aggrandizement, and self-defensiveness. It means judgment on America and on the churches because they have been so preoccupied with their own prosperity, safety, and righteousness that they have been blind to the interests of other nations. It means not to withdraw when our own "interests are no longer apparently imperiled while [our] weaker neighbors remain in danger." It means for America to wage war as those who "accept continuous, never ending responsibility for their neighbors. It is also to wage war in such a way that a decent--a just endurable if not a just and durable--peace can come out of it."[2]

Third, it means to respond with hope and trust. The response

> never gives up the one whom we must oppose, as though he were too depraved for redemption or for restoration to full rights in the human community. It does not accept the counsel of despair in the midst of fighting, allowing vindictive measures because by "fair fighting" our cause might be lost. It trusts that if we do our duty no evil can befall us in life or in death. The response is hopeful in that it regards the time of judgment as also time of redemption and looks in the midst of tragedy for the emergence of a better order than any which has been realized before. Nothing is regarded as beyond the scope of redemption--not the political life of men, nor the economic, nor the spiritual . . . .[3]

This redemptive response to war is directly related to the redemptive intent of the Sovereign. We are very close here to the heart of Niebuhr's faith.

> To recognize God at work in war is to live and act with faith in resurrection. If God were not in the war life would be miserable indeed. It would mean that the cosmos had no concern with justice. But if God were in the war only as

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1. *Ibid*.

2. *Ibid*.

3. *Ibid*.

> judge, man's misery would be only slightly assuaged since before the judge all are worthy of death. To see God in the war as the vicarious sufferer and redeemer, who is afflicted in all the afflictions of his people, is to find hope along with brokenheartedness in the midst of disaster.[1]

Niebuhr concludes that "these are but general reflections which do not presume to say to anyone what his particular duty in response to God's judgment must be."[2] But it is obvious that he has developed a bold, relevant, prophetic interpretation of war for those who are involved in it. The sovereignty of God has become the basis for a mature ethic that reaches to the central loyalties, fears, and interpretations of those who are faced with the crisis of war. It is not merely opposition, nor is it merely a call for the church's independence. It has a positive strategy, a program of action, which includes inner attitudes, social structures, present conduct, plans for the future, friends and enemies. And even as it speaks of judgment, it is always working and hoping for reconciliation.

Niebuhr extends the same sort of interpretation in the other two articles of the series, "Is God in the War?"[3] and "War as Crucifixion."[4] The latter deserves at least brief notice. It interprets the war in the light of the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross is not merely a strikingly similar analogy to war; it is "relevant to the understanding of our world and to our social action in ways which neither the sacerdotal nor the moral influence theory of its meaning has made evident."[1] It is

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 633.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *The Christian Century*, LIX (August 5, 1942), 953-55. This is an answer to the lively response that the first article received. Cf. p. 953.

[4] *The Christian Century*, LX (April 28, 1943), 513-15.

> the final, convincing demonstration of the fact that the order of the universe is not one of retribution in which goodness is rewarded and evil punished, but rather an order of graciousness wherein, as Jesus had observed, the sun is made to shine on evil and on good and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.[2]

Niebuhr rejects both the moralistic theory that interprets war as punishment of the unjust, and the Realpolitik that "interprets war as a conflict of powers in which victory with its fruits belongs to the stronger and in which moral words or phrases are nothing but instruments of power by means of which emotions are aroused and men are unified."[3] Against the moralistic theory, "in war the burden of suffering does not fall on the guilty, even when guilt is relatively determinable, but on the innocent."[4] Against Realpolitik, "in war men do not fight simply for their own interests but make great sacrifices for distant values, for their own country, or Poland, or 'democracy,' or 'the new order,' or 'the Four Freedoms.'"[5] He interprets the war as the crucifixion of the Son of man "along with the malefactors" and along with the innocent. If this is true, "then the graciousness of God, the self-giving love, is more manifest here than in all the years of peace."[6] For human response, this rules out vengeance and self-righteousness, and it calls forth hope and "reliance on the continued grace of God in the midst of our ungraciousness."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 514.

[2] Ibid. Jesus' statement about the equal suffering and equal reward of the just and the unjust recurs again and again in Niebuhr's writing and teaching. Obviously it had profound personal meaning for him, especially in approaching the problem of tragic suffering.

[3] Ibid., p. 513.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 515.

After the war was over, Niebuhr wrote two articles relevant to our theme. In "Utilitarian Christianity," he confesses that "the Christian church cannot maintain on the basis of its own record that it has made a notable contribution to the peace of the world."[2] He calls for repentance "because others are now suffering for us and because we are attacking the very Son of God or God himself in our endeavor to escape suffering and to maintain our civilization at any cost."[3] He speaks of judgment and disinterestedness. He calls for an independent Christianity that commends its social relevance less and concentrates on its own ethical imperatives more.[4] He concludes:

> A Christianity that is not socially utilitarian still has social relevance because its imperatives direct it to work in society. It is imperative for such a Christian faith to remember and to realize the dignity of every man as an eternal being, in his political and economic relations as well as everywhere else, though that realization may involve the sacrifice of dignity on the part of Christians and the Christian community. Imperative Christianity does not ask whether the love of neighbor will bring forth a society in which all men will love their neighbors; it acts in hope, to be sure, but love and justice are its immediate commands and not its far-off goals. It does not condemn the abuse of atomic power because we have thereby imperilled our future but because we violated our own principles.[5]

In "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," he criticizes the irresponsibility that "is manifest in the claim of nations to sovereignty, that is, . . . their claim to be under obligation to no power beyond themselves or to be justified in doing anything that seems necessary to preserve national existence."[1] The universal sovereignty of God means that the Christian is responsible for "not only the members of the nation to which he belongs but the members of the total society over which God presides."[2] Worldly religion "in distinction from religion that is loyal to God-in-Christ is readily identifiable when the human unit whose glory it seeks is a nation, as in the case of that section of the church in Germany which equated the Christian cause with that of national socialism."[3] Niebuhr writes of the task of the church in Germany to preach repentance. And then he turns to his own country:

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[1] Ibid.

[2] "Utilitarian Christianity," Christianity and Crisis, VI (July 8, 1946), 4.

[3] Ibid., p. 5.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

> So the apostolic Church in America cannot announce the mercy of God without pointing out how this nation transgresses the limits assigned to men when it defrauds the Negro and refuses to condemn itself for the indiscriminate manner in which it made war in its use of obliteration bombing, or deals with defeated nations in the spirit of retribution rather than of redemption.[4]

The 1950's: Nationalism and Radical Monotheism

When we turn to the next decade, we notice a puzzling difference in Niebuhr's writings on nationalism and peace and war. This is the decade of the Cold War, the Korean War, the McCarthy fear, the growth of the United Nations, and many decisions by the United States about responsibility toward Asia, toward Europe, and toward South America. It is a period of struggle toward arms control and nuclear test ban. Yet none of these problems appears in Niebuhr's writings. This is a puzzling contrast with his prophetic calls in the previous decades to resistance against Hitler, to repentance for obliteration bombing, to equal justice for Germany and Japan, to reconciliation with all men.

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[1] "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," op. cit., p. 116.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 121.

[4] Ibid., p. 128.

The only essay published during the fifties that devotes much attention to our theme is _Christ and Culture_, the bulk of which was actually written for a lecture series in 1949.[1] _The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry_ has a few references to the independence of the church from nationalism in general.[2] Finally, in 1960, the fifth chapter of _Radical Monotheism and Western Culture_ discusses "Radical Faith in Political Community."[3]

The purpose of the fifth chapter of _Radical Monotheism_ is to show that faith as confidence in a center of value and as loyalty to a cause manifests itself in politics as well as in religion.[4] Richard Niebuhr echoes a theme of his brother's: The modern nation-state conceives of itself and represents itself "as a community with a mission. It presents itself to its citizens and to those outside as a society pledged to the promotion of a cause transcending itself. It asks for loyalty to itself because it is loyal to such a cause."[1] Spain gains loyalty as the servant of the true Catholic religion, the United States and France as exponents of democracy and the rights of men, Germany as the exponent of culture, and Russia has its Messianism first as Czarist and then as communist.[2] The patriotic feeling of citizens has a double reference: toward the transcendent cause, and toward the nation as representative of that cause.

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[1] _Christ and Culture_, pp. vii and ix. "The Idea of Covenant in American Democracy" touches on the theme; see below.

[2] _The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry_, pp. 7-11, 14-17, 22, and 41.

[3] _Radical Monotheism and Western Culture_, pp. 64-77. This was first written for a lecture series that took place in 1957. See _Ibid._, p. 9.

[4] _Ibid._, p. 64.

> That in this ambivalent, not ambiguous, situation there is much confusion, much hypocrisy, and much self-delusion is all too clear. But to deny the actuality in modern national life of the presence of both kinds of loyalty, to affirm that the only real interest of nations is self-interest and that all reference to great causes is hypocrisy, is to make dogmatic assertions which seem too readily to discount many phenomena in our political existence. It is also to . . . ignore the significance of hypocrisy--that tribute which vice pays to virtue and that acknowledgment of a standard which is recognized as binding though not loved. To the theologian a political science that works only with the idea of national self-interest seems very much like the sort of theology which constructs its understanding of man with the use of the idea of sin only, without reference to that good nature which sin presupposes and of which it is the corrupted expression.[3]

Not only loyalty to a cause, but confidence in a center of value is important in politics. Usually this seems to appear as "the henotheistic or social faith for which the center is the community itself."[4] Yet even here the necessity of a transcendent trust, akin to a belief in natural law, is evident.

> Freedom of speech and press and freedom of research can be extended to people in a community only if in the latter as

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 66. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York, 1959), *passim*.

[2] *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 66.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

> a whole the confidence prevails that truth has power over lie, that it is not the enemy of life or of order or of justice, and that "in the nature of things" truth is mighty. Freedom implies the presence of the assurance that there is a kind of universal government of things, not only of material entities, on which nations as well as individuals can depend.[1]

Here we see the connection between the universal Creator and Governor of all things and a kind of natural law theory in Niebuhr's ethics. The "universal government of things" is a part of Christian faith in God who is universal sovereign; but it is also an actuality in political life that can be seen by honest observation unaided by Christian faith. Niebuhr, however, does qualify natural law theories and "orders of creation" theories in several ways. Gustafson represents Niebuhr accurately when he writes that in such theories there is

> a tendency to think statically rather than dynamically, to think of a once-for-all-ordered creation rather than an ordering activity in creation. There is always the necessity to look at an order from a particular historical point of view, rather than from a value-free, unbound perspective. There is the tendency to distinguish too sharply between the ethics of creation and the ethics of redemption--a distinction common to Roman Catholicism, to Lutheranism, and to Emil Brunner's ethics. And finally the emphasis in ethics of law and order tends to be on universal patterns, rather than on the historical realities emerging under particular, individual conditions. But there is a propriety in the concern of such ethics that is not to be lost, namely, that man is engaged in ordering work within certain limits and possibilities, and that man must attend to the structures of human relationships that are in conformity to the divine government.[2]

Niebuhr then describes the struggle in politics between monotheistic faith and henotheistic faith. Henotheism understands religious liberty as a right bestowed by the state on religions because of the need for compromise and unity, or because religion is a private thing. Monotheism, on the other hand, emphasizes that religious liberty has another source as well. The sovereignty of God as prior to and independent of human values and institutions is this other source.[1] Similarly, there is a monotheistic basis for the balance of power:

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[1] Ibid.

[2] James Gustafson, "Introduction," The Responsible Self, p. 32. Cf. also Waldo Beach, "A Theological Analysis of Race Relations," pp. 209-11.

> . . . the conviction that ultimate power belongs only to God and that in the nature of things, according to the constitution of the universal commonwealth as it were, finite power is actually limited and works destructively if it is not guarded against the constant temptation to make itself infinite, totalitarian, and godlike.[2]

And concerning law, there are henotheistic or positivistic interpretations of its context, and there are interpretations of its context as "the will of God—a structure of right that pervades the realm of being."[3]

Niebuhr devotes several pages to a similar analysis of the context of the democratic doctrine of equality, and he concludes by briefly commenting on the democratic process as interpreted within the context of monotheistic faith:

> Then no relative power, be it that of the nation or its people as well as that of tyrants, can claim absolute sovereignty or total loyalty. The power that has brought a nation into being has also elected into existence its companion nations; and the rights of such nations to life, liberty, and the pursuit of their well-being are equal in the universal commonwealth of being. Relying on the ultimate source of being and the ultimate power that conserves beings, men will accept the relativity of all their judgments and continue in their striving to make political decisions that express their universal faith. The question of henotheistic or monotheistic democracy is not the question of national egoism or national altruism; it is not a question about our loves but about our faiths, about our ultimate confidence and our ulti-

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1. Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 70.

2. Ibid., p. 72.

3. Ibid.

mate fidelity.[1]

We recognize here many of the themes that we have come to expect in Niebuhr's writings on political matters. We recognize the theme of hope or confidence, and the rejection of cynical interpretations that reduce all politics to pure self-interest. We recognize the transcendent trust in a kind of universal government of things--a dynamic activity akin to what more static and traditional terminology calls natural law. We recognize, too, Niebuhr's explanation that a nation has limits and that its citizens have loyalties independent from the nation. But in at least one respect Niebuhr's political essays in the fifties differ from those of previous decades. We do not notice any specific suggestions for any of the concrete decisions that faced our nation in the 1950's.

This omission may not mean much. From 1954 to 1957, Niebuhr was preoccupied with his study of the church and theological education in America.[2] Furthermore, although Niebuhr regarded the reform of culture, including politics, as "one of the church's never-ending responsibilities," he saw it not as his own specialty but as the specialty of others like his brother.[3] His own calling was to work out a theological ethics and to work for the reform of the church. Therefore, it is not really fair to ask him to have written specifically on politics in the fifties. But there remains a question, posed by Joseph Allen, that must be confronted directly.

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[1] Ibid., p. 77.

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, The Advancement of Theological Education (New York, 1957), pp. ix-x.

[3] "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

Joseph Allen, who feels great loyalty to Niebuhr, praises his ethics for its wholeness. "Niebuhr's significance for Protestant ethics," he says, is that it speaks "of faith and of concrete decisions in such a way that the one actually sheds light on the other."[1] But as Allen proceeds, he seems to raise a question about this wholeness. He wonders whether the principle of radical monotheism is closely enough related to actual situational decisions--"how to vote or what policy to support regarding Yugoslavia, for example."[2] "What is needed is an intermediate link between radical monotheism and concrete action. How does a person who affirms loyalty to the One God interpret the world where people vote and governments act?"[3] Allen explains this need further, saying that Niebuhr

> vacillated somewhat over the role of concrete moral principles. While affirming their necessity, he hesitated to devise them and spoke of the Christian ethic of redemption as one of free creativity, not of principles.
>
> A more serious problem was his reluctance to carry his reflection about selves-in-community over into such areas as the family, politics, the economy. The syllabus for his Christian ethics course included these subjects, but he rarely progressed past the lectures on marriage. Only in his thinking about the Church did he adequately demonstrate the potential of his own theory to bring wholeness to Christian ethics.[4]

Allen's question is central for any ethic. It is the main question that John Bennett asks in "Ethical Principles and the Context."[5]

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[1] Joseph L. Allen, "A Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (November 25, 1963), 217.

[2] Ibid., p. 218.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 219.

[5] See above, p. 209.

Everything that we have seen in Niebuhr's writings on nationalism and war, especially in the thirties and forties, demonstrates again and again that he does have a strategy of revolution or transformation that does guide specific decisions. Even though Niebuhr's specialty is not political ethics, we have seen that he does speak discriminating and prophetic words on nationalism and war, that he speaks these words from a consistent perspective grounded in a prophetic eschatology, and that these words have been not only vigorous but incisive. Niebuhr has perceived the cause and the cure of major social illnesses before others were aware of them. Yet during the fifties this prophetic perceptiveness may be less clear than previously. One wonders, therefore, whether Allen's question applies not to a structural weakness in Niebuhr's ethics, but to a temporary de-emphasis in the fifties. We notice that Allen repeatedly refers to the foundation of Niebuhr's thought as "the principle of radical monotheism."[1] This term characterizes Niebuhr's thought in the fifties more than in other periods. Perhaps we should look more carefully at Niebuhr's other writings in the fifties for clues to a temporary shift.

Chapters i through vi of Christ and Culture were written for a series of lectures to be delivered in January of 1949.[2] We have examined these first six chapters and have seen how clearly they favor the strategy of transformationism, as do Niebuhr's other major writings.[3] But so far we have not examined chapter vii, which Niebuhr added for publication in 1951.[1] In this final chapter, a subtle shift seems to have occurred. The decision between the five ways of relating Christ and culture now seems to be purely relative.[2] Transformationism is not favored in any way.

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[1] Allen, p. 219, et passim.

[2] Christ and Culture, pp. ix and xi.

[3] See chapter vii above.

In reviewing Christ and Culture, Joseph Haroutunian regrets that Niebuhr does not offer more help for taking an attitude toward our culture. He asks, "Does not every man tend to prefer one of these attitudes to the others, while doing his best to be just to them all? On what grounds is such a preference to be made? And is it not true that his particular decisions will be conditioned by the attitude which he considers to be soundest?"[3] John Bennett thinks the last chapter is a poor anticlimax. "Instead of putting together what he has helped his readers to learn from the five types studied he . . . falls back into a kind of diffident indecision which is remote from the spirit of the other chapters."[4] One wonders whether this "falling back" has a specifiable cause. As the decade of the fifties arrives, sometime in the two years between the writing of chapter vi and chapter vii of Christ and Culture, did Niebuhr temporarily de-emphasize a basic element in his ethics of transformation? Specifically, did he de-emphasize the Christological element, the knowable disclosure of the character of the Sovereign in Jesus Christ? And if so, might this help explain what seems to be a relative quietness on specific political issues during the fifties?

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[1] Christ and Culture, p. x.

[2] Ibid., pp. 230-34ff.

[3] Joseph Haroutunian in Interpretation, VI (January, 1952), 114.

[4] John Bennett in Christianity and Society, XVII (Winter, 1951-1952), 23-24.

The fifth chapter of Radical Monotheism, the one essay Niebuhr wrote on nationalism or war in the fifties, may provide an important clue. As we have seen, many of Niebuhr's characteristic themes reappear in this chapter--themes of the universal government over nations and the independence of God from national interest. But this chapter does not present a positive strategy for action. It does not suggest the shape of a transformation or revolution that corrects errors of nationalism and invites responsibile participation. This lack of a sense of transformation or revolution may explain the temporary distance between radical monotheism and actual situational decisions such as "what policy to support regarding Yugoslavia." In The Church Against the World, Niebuhr called for the independence of the church from its captivity to nationalism. He then said, "So long, of course as the church has no faith in a divine revolution and no strategy of its own for participation in that revolution it will need to commit itself to some other revolutionary faith and strategy or remain conservative."[1] The image of the divine revolution seems to be missing from the fifth chapter of Radical Monotheism. The corresponding strategy for specific, positive, and independent action by the Christian community is also missing.

Moreover, although the theme of the universal and transcendent Creator and Governor is clearly developed in the fifth chapter of Radical Monotheism, the Redeemer is missing. Throughout our study we have argued that the divine revolution and the prophetic strategy in Niebuhr's thought have depended heavily on all three principles of the sovereignty of God, and particularly on the knowable historical revelation of the redemptive character of the Sovereign. The character of God's redemptive action defines the strategy of the revolution that we are called to participate in. It gives particular shape to our fitting response. It gives content to the otherwise vague call to respond to the sovereign God. It gives hope and courage, and it gives a picture of meaningful Christian action.[1] But this redemptive action of the Sovereign is not mentioned in the chapter under consideration. It is not too surprising, then, that the shape of the transforming action and man's response to that action as described in Niebuhr's previous writings on nationalism and war are missing. We miss Niebuhr's emphasis on reconciliation, on the process of healing, on deliverance from ideological bondage, on vicarious suffering, on repentance and conversion of the will, on building international structures and universal community. These are basic to his prophetic strategy. If for some reason he temporarily de-emphasized the knowable character of the redemptive action of God, then the expected result would be a blurring of this prophetic strategy, a weakening of the connection between the sovereignty of God and specific human responsibility in the concrete situation.

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[1] The Church Against the World, p. 146.

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[1] Frederick Herzog, in his Understanding God (New York, 1966), pp. 124ff., puts his finger precisely on "the shape of God's action" as the crucial point at which further development and agreement is needed in the ethics of Paul Lehmann, Paul Ramsey, and Harvey Cox as diverse representatives of contemporary Protestant ethics. He concludes: "Our essay suggests that Jesus' diakonic acts provide us with a central image for understanding this shape." (Ibid., p. 124). Dr. Herzog's analysis is equally applicable to Niebuhr. Our study of Niebuhr suggests not only that this is the crucial area for development in Niebuhr's ethics, but that it is the logical extension of the work Niebuhr has begun, and that Niebuhr has worked out the method for further delineating the shape of the reconciling action of the Sovereign.

However, if a subtle shift did occur in the fifties of the sort that these clues suggest, it was neither a permanent shift nor an adopting of what Willem Zuurdeeg called an Aristotelian or Tillichian position,[1] but rather a temporary de-emphasis for situational reasons. Niebuhr temporarily de-emphasized the Christological theme, for reasons that we shall have to discuss. But he did not drop this theme. There is an article published in the fifties that considers historical origins of American politics, and it does emphasize the knowable and historically revealed character of God's kingship:

> Promise or covenant is the ordering principle. There is nothing arbitrary about the king, for he is above all faithful and has bound himself to govern in accordance with purposes and the laws that he has promulgated. He does not change them because he has favorites; he is not subject to whims and caprices; his unity is like the unity of the loyal man who though he has sworn even to his own hurt does not change. Furthermore, the laws by which the king has promised to govern, in the freedom of his sovereign decision, are not unknown. Some are indeed beyond present understanding, but the processes of nature, the reason of man and the revelation of the divine will make the content of much of the fundamental law of the universe known to man. The administration of the world is reliable; the laws can be known by means of patient inquiry; their execution can be counted upon. The fundamental characteristic of the powerful One is that he is faithful, keeping his promise.[2]

And this does have consequences for politics. Niebuhr affirms "the obligations of unlimited loyalty, under God, to principles of truthtelling, of justice, of loyalty to one another, of indissoluble union."[1] He describes the transforming influence of those Christians "who believe that the world has this fundamental moral structure of a covenant society and that what is possible and required in the political realm is the affirmation and reaffirmation of man's responsibility as a promise-maker, promise-keeper, a covenanter in universal community."[2] What is more important, his writings in the sixties pick up the theme again and resume the march.

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[1] Cf. Willem Zuurdeeg, Review of Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, Theology Today, XVIII (July, 1961), 215-16, and Niebuhr's response in "Critic's Corner," Theology Today, XVIII (October, 1961), 359-60.

[2] Niebuhr, "The Idea of Covenant in American Democracy," Church History, XXIII (June, 1954), 131-32.

The Early 1960's: The Cold War and the Illusions of Power

Niebuhr's way of developing an ethics of transformation includes careful historical study and testing in the lab of history. It is therefore fitting that he should turn once again in 1961 to writing an essay on the relation between Protestantism and democracy in American history.[3] The main concern of the essay is for the independence of Protestantism from simple identification with any cultural movement, even democracy. Niebuhr says the independence of Protestantism results from having an independent strategy, a strategy of movement rather than institutionalization. He describes the unifying and energizing source of an independent Protestantism as the biblical disclosure of God's reconciling and liberating action in Christ and as the consti-

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1. _Ibid_., p. 134.

2. _Ibid_., p. 135.

3. "The Protestant Movement and Democracy," _op_. _cit_.

tutional strategy that he delineated in The Kingdom of God in America.[1] Niebuhr re-emphasizes his description of the strategy of the revolution and of its transforming influence on political structures and political behavior.[2]

The last article that Niebuhr published before his death is an even more direct affirmation of the prophetic strain that is central to his thought. It is an exposition of the biblical passage that he may have considered *the* paradigm of the ethics of response, the tenth chapter of Isaiah.[3] Since the theological development of his ethics proceeds not only by "testing in the lab of history" but also by recalling "the story of our life" as remembered by prophets and apostles, it fits beautifully that the last essay he published before his death should be biblical exposition.

Niebuhr begins, "In these long years of the cold war between Christendom and Communism no chapter of the Bible is more illuminating and helpful to Christian faith than Isaiah 10."[4] Isaiah judges not only the unbelief of his contemporaries, but our own unbelief. In the various ways that we and they interpret the news, we show our belief "that there is no God, no world government, no universal ordering."[5] We show our belief "that the power which is the creative source of and ruler over our human history--the determiner of our destiny--is either blind in its willfulness or careless of the fate of what has come forth from it."[1] Because of our "deep distrust of the power or of the goodness of the kingdom of God," we interpret the news in terms of idolatrous faith in fate or in some finite power such as true religion.[2] Into this situation Isaiah comes with "his interpretation of what God is saying in, through, and beyond all human speech and action. . . ." The word that Isaiah speaks is the same word that was spoken "in the presence of Egypt and Babylonia and Macedonia and Rome and the barbarians and Islam; the word that in various forms, yet always with essentially the same meaning, came to Jeremiah and to Jesus, to Augustine and Luther, and now is spoken to us."[3] This word proclaims that Russia, our enemy, is the instrument of God's action, and that God intends to correct us, to make us just, and to reconcile us to our enemies.

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 43-45. Cf. chap. vii above.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 29-36, 48-49, and 66-70.

[3] Niebuhr, "The Illusions of Power," *The Pulpit*, XXXIII (April, 1962), 4ff. Cf. *Responsible Self*, pp. 67, 169-70, and 173;"War as the Judgment of God," p. 630.

[4] "The Illusions of Power," p. 4.

[5] *Ibid.*

We create illusions about our self-righteousness by comparing ourselves with communism and concluding that we are the instruments of the good and the defenders of value against the threat of atheistic communism. Niebuhr attacks this self-righteousness by pointing out that according to Isaiah, God uses our enemy to do good no less than he uses us.[4] Niebuhr asks us to measure our alleged righteousness by the character of God's intention, as disclosed especially in Jesus

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 5.

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Christ.

> We need to forget, in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, all those notes and overtones of divine anger and human punishment which are present in Isaiah's formulation of God's word, and also all our own guilt-feelings and masochistic tendencies to appease an angry power that is trying to get even with godless men. We are dealing with the Holy One; with holy love that is not envious of man, that needs no vengeance, that does not desire the pain or destruction of his creatures, yet does insist on their healing, on their being made whole, on their becoming truly what they are in possibility.[1]

God is healing us by coercing us into action that fits our own understanding of what is good.

> Under the pressure of our enemy we have been relentlessly pushed to keep promises which we made to ourselves and to one another in our society, to keep also the promises of our nation to other peoples. A dramatic instance is what we have been required to do under this foreign pressure in trying to overcome the deep injustice of discrimination against the Negro, an injustice by our own standards. Here there is no imposition upon us of a foreign idea. The idea is our own; the promise of equality is one we ourselves have made to each other. The covenant of equality lies at the basis of our national existence, though we have violated it from the beginning. But our goodness has been feeble. We have not had the power to be good in terms of our own standard. Left in peace we did little to live up to our own idea of goodness. Now the pressure has been exerted upon us and communism, our enemy, has been used as an instrument toward our own health.[2]

God uses the pressure of our enemy to deliver us from our isolationism, which was a betrayal of our own purpose of liberation for all men, and to reconcile us to other nations. God uses our enemy to make us

> become ourselves again—a nation that acknowledges its solidarity with mankind, that remembers the promise it made in its inception, to stand, for instance, for the principle that all men, not Americans only, are created free and equal. Under the pressure of that inconvenient instrument—communism—in the hands of the Almighty, we have even learned to practice some love of other enemies and have not been permitted to maintain long hatred against Japan or Germany, or even against those so-called neutrals about whom we were tempted to say that those that are not with us are against

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[1] *Ibid*.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 6.

us.[1]

Not that our enemies have good intentions: Assyria intended "to destroy not only Hebrew lives but also the Hebrew nation and Hebrew devotion to God and its covenant," and the Russian power intends similar destruction for us.[2] God's intentions are different from the enemy's intentions. "Through all the tragic story of the nations, including the story of our times, including the central, wonderfully symbolic history of the Cross of Christ, this word of God, this word about God, resounds: 'You thought to do evil, but I thought to do good . . . .'"[3]

God's redemptive intention provides hope even in the face of threat. As new possibilities emerged for Israel out of its confrontation with Assyria and Babylonia, "so our own time is standing not only in the presence of adversaries, but of new possibilities. For instance, the emergence of a more united mankind with new values, larger outlooks, deeper understanding."[4] Niebuhr's hope has a consistent shape: it is a hope in processes of reconciliation, in processes that develop a more united mankind, an international community. The Sovereign is working to reconcile, and this is our hope.

Niebuhr goes further in interpreting the Cold War with the aid of Isaiah. He points out that the Russians are human, not supermen. They are a powerful threat now, but their power will pass as all

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1. _Ibid_.
2. _Ibid_.
3. _Ibid_.
4. _Ibid_., pp. 6-7.

powers do. He calls for a strategy of self-reformation in accordance with our own laws and promises, and for self-defense against the enemy. And he calls for quietness and rest, for trust in "the one who makes us whole, who heals our diseases, who makes right our iniquities, who saves our lives from destruction."[1]

This all too inadequate summary should be enough to indicate that Niebuhr is commenting specifically and prophetically on the Cold War from the standpoint of faith in the Sovereign whose character is made known in Israel and in Jesus Christ. This Sovereign judges us and corrects us, but his intention is to make us more just, to reconcile us to our enemies, and to create universal community. We are called to respond in ways that fit that intention.

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 7.

CHAPTER IX

THE ROCK AND THE ROSETTA STONE

It is now clear that three principles are essential to Niebuhr's understanding of the sovereignty of God: God's rule is universal, independent, and revealed. His rule is universal: it is present in politics as well as in individual life, in the present situation of actual happenings as well as in the past or future, in other nations including our enemies as well as in our own patriotic loyalties, in war as well as in peace. His rule is independent: it is not the possession of any human set of values, or dogmas, or causes, or institutions, or power structures. His rule is revealed: its faithful character is disclosed in relative history, recognizable in present events, and definitive for the shape of a Christian strategy of transformation.

These three principles are essential for every aspect of Niebuhr's ethics. They are central in his understanding of revelation and in his answer to the problems of relativism and subjectivism.[1] They form the basis for his understanding of ethical responsibility and the transformation of culture.[1] They shape the guiding images for understanding and they determine the positive strategy for action in the concrete situation of decision and response.[2]

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[1] Chapters i-iv above.

The third principle concerns the specific character of the divine rule. It is the answer to the question, What is God doing in the world? What is the shape of His action as illuminated by relative but revelatory patterns of action? The divine rule receives its specific form and outline from the events that are central to our history.[3] The character of the divine faithfulness is the keystone, or one of the three keystones, of Niebuhr's ethics.[4]

But this is precisely where a fundamental problem arises. The problem is that Niebuhr indicates two different sorts of basic revelatory event in our history. These suggest two different sorts of character whose relation to one another in the faithfulness of God is not always clear. The two basic characteristics are determining power and reconciling purpose. We have already noticed some of their content in the course of our study. But a more specific examination of their relation to one another, even if far too brief, may be helpful in understanding Niebuhr's ethics, especially in the fifties. And it may also suggest a direction for further development.

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[1] Chapters v-vii above.

[2] Chapter viii above.

[3] Chapters iii and iv above.

[4] Meaning of Revelation, pp. 167-68, et passim; "The Triad of Faith," pp. 3-12; "On the Nature of Faith," pp. 99-101; The Responsible Self, pp. 161-78.

The Power That Determines Our Existence and Our Destiny

The moral idealism and the value-theory method that Niebuhr's early articles attacked tended to make God merely a function of man's desires. Man was the hero of life and the wishes of man's psyche were the norms for theology.[1] The epistemological subject, defined primarily in psychological terms, became the center of the theological endeavor.[2] Worship became sterile and the church became the captive of nationalism and materialism.[3] The psychological subject proved too weak to play the role of hero in the battle that faced the church.

So Niebuhr contended with fervor that God is the object of theology, that theology must concentrate on its object, and that this object is related to man's whims the way the Rock of Gibraltar is.[4] God is the rock that stands where it stands for its own reasons, whether man likes it or not.

Calvin's concept of the all-determining power of God was the natural antidote for the powerless subjectivism against which Niebuhr was reacting. There is an obvious objectivity in the all-determining power that is independent of human whims. There is an obvious theocentricity in a theology that sees all areas of life as determined by none but the omnipotent Lord. Subjective moral idealism in American theology originated largely as a reaction against this very doctrine of Calvin's; it was therefore fitting that Niebuhr's corrective should have come largely in the form of the Calvinistic doctrine that had been repressed. Niebuhr not only reasserted an emphasis on the power of God; he went so far that in a major portion of his writings his basic concept approaches a Calvinistic all-encompassing, all-determining omnipotence.

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[1] "Man the Sinner," pp. 276 and 279; The Church Against the World, pp. 135-37.

[2] "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," pp. 47 and 48. See chapter i above.

[3] "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," pp. 47-48; The Church Against the World, pp. 1-2, 5-8, 11, 124-39, 144.

[4] "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," Girvetz, op. cit., p. 331.

In his first constructive essay on ethics and theological method, Niebuhr indicates the relation between his criticism of subjective idealism and his emphasis on divine power. He singles out three categories that point to the objective character of God but that are missing in the prevailing theology of the time. The categories are the unity, the universality, and the power of God. Niebuhr calls for their re-emphasis in order to overcome the tendency to define God as a means to a human end.[1]

Subjective idealism led the church into captivity to the world by maintaining "that the action of free, intelligent men was good and that God's action was limited to human agencies of good will."[2] Against such subjectivism Niebuhr argues for the necessity of a revolt led by the creed of divine determinism.[3] Divine determinism makes clear that God is not dependent on man's will. The church may well die; God "can and will raise up another people to carry out the mission entrusted to it if the Christian community fail him."[1]

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[1] "Value-Theory and Theology," pp. 102-03.

[2] The Church Against the World, p. 153.

[3] Ibid., pp. 153-54.

The Kingdom of God ~~in~~ *America*, as we have seen, is an attempt to describe the central core of American faith. It is written not out of antiquarian curiosity but out of a need to understand the present and future travels of the community of Christian pilgrims, and to understand "God's guidance of their way" in the past, present, and future.[2] Not only the chapter explicitly devoted to the sovereignty of God, but every chapter of the book reveals the predominance in Niebuhr's thought of the power of God.[3]

Because Niebuhr is not only describing but also commending, his emphasis on the exclusiveness of God's power reflects his own interest. He explains that Calvin's concept of the present sovereignty of God was the primary conviction and the distinctive emphasis of the Reformation.[4] The reformers were impressed not so much with "God's changeless perfection as his forceful reality and power."[5] Protestantism rejected the idea of any intermediaries in this rule; God's sovereignty is "immediate and direct."[6] Niebuhr quotes Calvin on the sole rulership of God and on the rejection of claims to intermediate power by other would-be sovereigns; and he concludes by affirming the centrality of this doctrine of exclusive sovereignty for Protestantism: "The confession of the sole rulership of God and the declaration of loyalty to his kingdom was an even more important element in the Protestant faith than was the rejection of mundane representatives of the divine rule."[1] The Protestant faith spoke of this rulership as absolute and as temporally immediate; "Its word was 'now.'"[2] Niebuhr comes very close to identifying all power and all that happens with God's immediate action. God and nature, he writes, are like a hand and a glove.[3]

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 9.

[2] *The Kingdom of God in America*, pp. 1-2.

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 137-38, 173, 185, and 195.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 17-18.

[5] *Ibid*., pp. 19 and 20.

[6] *Ibid*., p. 21. Cf. also p. 23.

Niebuhr suggests that he is here describing not merely what the Reformers and the Puritans could see, but what we must see in order to understand our present situation and to recover the prophetic dynamic of the Protestant faith. He is advocating divine determinism as an antidote to the subjectivism he is opposing: The prophetic Protestants "did not begin with an idea of God made up out of the most amiable human characteristics, proceeding then to inquire whether a corresponding being existed; they began rather with that last being which crowns with destruction the life which proceeds from it."[4] Must we not conclude that Niebuhr sees in this Calvinistic conception the way he himself proposes to discern the presence of God in history? Is he not suggesting that his search for theological objectivism has found an answer in an approach similar to Calvin's?

There are certainly other, different motifs as well in Niebuhr's way of speaking of God, but the strong presence of this Calvinistic motif can not be denied. In "The Grace of Doing Nothing," he writes that God controls the outcome of historic events with an inevitable determinism that is not in the least affected by human wishes. He praises the faith of those who believe that there is a God--a real God: "Like the communists they are assured that the actual processes of history will inevitably and really bring a different kind of world with lasting peace."[1] "The actual structure of things is such that our wishes for a different result do not in the least affect the outcome. . . . This God of things as they are is inevitable and quite merciless."[2] He responds to his brother's criticism by reaffirming the Gibraltar-like omnipresence of God: "But God, I believe, is always in history; . . . He is the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises and overwhelms us when we seek to impose our wishes, contrary to his, upon him."[3] In "War as the Judgment of God" he defines Christian ethics in terms of response, and he says that we must respond to no other power than God. He defines three general viewpoints, all of which see God as acting in war along with some other power such as the bad actions of men, the threats of the enemy, or the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. And he rejects each of these viewpoints for the same reason that Calvin rejected the idea that any powers other than God could change what happens in the world.[4] Niebuhr insists that once we see any part of life as a response to any power other than God, that power begins to be our god. Speaking of the three viewpoints which see God acting along with some other power, he concludes unequivocally:

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[1] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

[2] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[3] Ibid., pp. 55-56.

[4] Ibid., p. 51.

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[1] "The Grace of Doing Nothing," Girvetz, p. 323.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 324.

[3] "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," Girvetz, p. 331.

[4] [John Calvin], *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles ("The Library of Christian Classics"; Philadelphia, 1960), XX, p. 201: "But

> In every case there is a dualism: two actions must be responded to, the action of God and the action of the opponent. To be sure, Christians are accustomed to dualism, for their two-worldly life involves them forevermore in the crisis of time and eternity, of this aeon and the future one, of the life in the spirit and the life in the body. But the dualism of double response is an intolerable one; it makes us "double-minded men, unstable in all our ways," ditheists who have two gods, the Father of Jesus Christ and our country, or Him and Democracy, or Him and Peace.[1]

In the concluding chapter of Christ and Culture he stresses the necessity for belief that God's sovereignty is all-inclusive, over society and nature as well as over individuals and churches:

> If I do not believe that the power that ultimately presides over human societies is merciful toward them but only toward individuals, then I will not only turn to the service of individuals but will direct my social actions by my underlying unbelief about the redeemability of society. If I have no confidence that the power that manifests itself in nature is God, I will accept nature's bounties without gratitude and its blows without repentance, though I be ever so God-conscious when I meet gracious or critical spirits in church or society.[2]

Later in the chapter, Niebuhr writes at length about the power that determines our existence at all points. For example, he states:

> Before we choose to live we have been chosen into existence, and have been determined to love life as a value. We have not chosen

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when unbelievers transfer the government of the universe from God to the stars, they fancy that their bliss or their misery depends upon the decrees and indications of the stars, not upon God's will; so it comes about that their fear is transferred from him, toward whom alone they ought to direct it, to stars and comets. Let him, therefore, who would beware of this infidelity ever remember that there is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him."

[1] "War as the Judgment of God," pp. 630-31.

[2] Christ and Culture, p. 236.

> human existence, but have been elected members of humanity. We did not choose to be rational rather than instinctive beings; we reason because we must. We have not chosen the time and place of our present, but have been selected to stand at this post at this hour of watch or of battle. We have not chosen to be social beings, immeasurably dependent on our fellows, nor have we chosen our culture. . . .
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> We make our free decisions not only in such dependence on origins beyond our control, but also in dependence on consequences that are not in our power.[1]

This power, the power that elects us to our place in history, that determines our existence and our destiny, we call fate or chance when we reason faithlessly. But when we reason faithfully, we call this same power God. Not the good part of this power, not the ultimate power behind this power, but this power itself is what we call God. We are given "the conviction, mediated by a life, a death, and a miracle beyond understanding, that the source and ground and government and end of all things--the power we (in our distrust and disloyalty) call fate and chance--is faithful, utterly trustworthy, utterly loyal to all that issues from it."[2]

Niebuhr's recovery of the sovereignty of God has profound validity and solid strength. But there is a wide difference between faith in God who is Lord of history, dynamically acting and governing, and faith which tends to identify God with every power that determines our existence and destiny. The latter is a faith against which sensitive Christians will rebel, if the history of Calvinism is any guide.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 250.

[2] Ibid., p. 254. Cf. Responsible Self, pp. 109-26.

[3] Cf. Daniel Day Williams, Review of Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, XVII (November, 1961), 99-101. I am heavily dependent on Dr. Williams for his

If we meet God in history wherever our existence is determined by power, then we meet God as a power that often seems demonic rather than divine. Such a conception of God has always had problems with the reality of evil in history. Indeed Niebuhr himself mentions suffering with perhaps greater frequency than any other fact of life as needing more adequate interpretation.[1] If he really means to say anything like what we have heard him say about all-inclusive omnipotence, we must ask whether Niebuhr also has problems with such a concept. But to ask this question is to be directed to his statement that through Christ we are given the conviction that this source and governor of all things is faithful and loyal. We must ask what this means and how it relates to what he says about the power that determines us. And this leads to the second historical reality that gives definitive content to our knowledge of God.

The Suffering Reconciler

The second historical reality to which Niebuhr points in order to characterize the activity of God in history is Jesus Christ. Just as his emphasis on the power that determines is tied to his theocentric revolt against subjectivism, so Niebuhr's emphasis on the central event of Jesus Christ is necessarily inseparable from his

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wrestling with the problem of omnipotence, evil, and the revelation of the Father on the cross. Barth and Williams have much in common at this point, I think.

[1] Notice the repeated references in the short space of ten pages in The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 120-22, 124, 125, 128, and 130.

historical relativism. According to this historical relativism, the concrete content which is given to us for our knowledge consists of historical realities in our relative history and nothing more.[1] As Christians, our relative history is concerned primarily with persons in communities of loyalty, and particularly with the person of the Living God manifest in the event which is central in our history, the event of Jesus Christ.[2] That the event of Jesus Christ is the central event for our relation to the Living God is simply a historical fact, a fact of our history. We can not attempt to escape this fact without becoming stuck in the errors of pretension, defensiveness, and abstraction.[3]

Accepting this fact is a necessary part of accepting the limitations of history. It is also a return to that position in which we have always found our greatest vigor. Thus the chapter on "The Story of Our Life" begins:

> We do well to remind ourselves that the Christian community has usually—and particularly in times of its greatest vigor—used an historical method. . . . The preaching of the early Christian church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience, unhistorical and super-social in character. It was primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.[4]

Niebuhr suggests that we know God more in particular events, like bursts of lightning, than in a presence which is always the same.[5]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 10, *et passim.*

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-73, 102-09, and 152-54; *Christ and Culture*, pp. 245-49.

[3] *The Meaning of Revelation*, pp. 22-53.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44. Cf. also "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 221, and *Christ and Culture*, p. 29.

[5] "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 228.

Jesus Christ, as the self-revelatory action of the living God, is our Rosetta stone by which we interpret all the happenings of life.

> From this point forward we must listen for the remembered voice in all the sounds that assail our ears, and look for the remembered activity in all the actions of the world upon us. The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is now trusted and known as the contemporary God, revealing himself in every event; but we do not understand how we could trace his working in these happenings if he did not make himself known to us through the memory of Jesus Christ; nor do we know how we should be able to interpret all the words we read as words of God save by the aid of this Rosetta stone.[1]

It is possible for such a particular event to be the primary revelatory event and still not contradict the idea that God is also revealed generally elsewhere. But it is possible only if the content of the particular event is compatible with the content of the general events; and the two different sets of content as Niebuhr describes them are not compatible.

Sometimes Niebuhr writes of the revelation in Jesus Christ in general terms, such as goodness or "eternal earnestness." We shall skip over these terms in order to get to the more concrete. The concrete is a person, not a principle.[2] This person is the complex figure who is described by the New Testament, and we must not reduce the complexity to some one essential characteristic, as gnostics and cultural Protestants do.[3] But though Niebuhr prefers to point to "the Biblical Christ,"[4] rather than attempt to give a full portrait, he does describe some of the characteristics of this concrete person who is greater and stranger than all his portraits.

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[1] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 154.

[2] Cf. "The Norm of the Church," pp. 10-11.

[3] Christ and Culture, p. 109.

[4] Ibid.

Some of these characteristics explicitly stress the fact that Jesus Christ is the opposite of that unchanging, inevitable power that is the sole determiner of our existence. According to Niebuhr, the action that Jesus performs is characterized by its powerlessness, by its subjection to other powers that make Jesus into a victim. Thus, for instance, Jesus is the revelation of a God who is not an emperor but a self-emptying servant.[1] This "revelation of God's person" transforms our understanding of our transgressions; we see in Christ how our sins cause God to suffer: "They do not merely violate the soul and body of the self or its community; they do violence to the body of God; it is his son who is slain by our iniquity."[2] When Niebuhr makes his central criticism of culture-Protestantism, he focuses on Jesus Christ as victim and mediator.[3] Christ accomplishes his transforming work "by living with men in great humility, enduring death for their sakes, and rising again from the grave in a demonstration of God's grace . . ."[4] In Christ something new and revolutionary enters into our thought, so that it transforms the understanding of goodness which we had based on our own value theories: "Here is goodness that empties itself, and makes itself of no reputation, a goodness that is all outgoing, reserving nothing for itself, yet having all things."[5]

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[1] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 40.

[2] Ibid., pp. 165-66.

[3] Christ and Culture, p. 101.

[4] Ibid., p. 191.

[5] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 190.

Niebuhr's emphasis on the powerlessness of Christ goes back to his first published article, in the days of his early liberal idealism. In "An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought," he argues that recent thought about God presents two possible alternatives: an omnipotent God who actively causes all events or a finite God who is an ameliorative force within events. The first alternative, the view of God as omnicausal omnipotence, is repugnant to Christians; it is a view of God as "'the responsible author of evil' as he must be according to Hegelian conceptions, against which the proponents of the faith in a finite God inveigh."[1] Niebuhr in 1920 argues for the other alternative, the finite God. The difference between the Christian faith and the view of God as omnicausal omnipotence "lies in the element of resignation in the Christian religion." The symbol of God's nature for Christian faith is the gentleness and delicacy of Jesus, his utmost tolerance and subtlest sympathy, "his non-resistance and submission." The submission of the cross is God's way in the world.[2]

Throughout his writings, Niebuhr describes Christ not only in terms of his powerlessness, but also in terms of his purpose: to reconcile all men to God and to each other and to their world.[3] In Christ we see God always working loyally to overcome alienation and to bring about reconciliation. By our self-centeredness, distrust, and defensiveness, we cause alienation, but we see in Christ "how by an infinite suffering of the eternal victim we are condemned and forgiven at the same time; how an infinite loyalty refuses to abandon us either to evil or to nothingness, but works at our salvation with a tenacity we are tempted to deplore."[1] This is the unity of God that we see in Christ—the unity of a loyal will always acting toward the unity or reconciliation of all things: "He met us not as the one beyond the many but as the one who acts in and through all things, not as the unconditioned but as the conditioner. The oneness of the person was the oneness of a will directed towards unity of all things in our world."[2] The unity we had been fashioning was self-centered and divisively exclusive; "but the Father of Jesus Christ does not bear the image of our unity; through him we see our disorder and our lack of unity and through him find unity flowing into our world in another manner than we had desired."[3] The act of God in Christ is an act which liberates us, and the direction of the liberation is toward reconciliation, faith, and trust between God and us: ". . . the great work of Christ for moral beings is his work as the renewer and transformer of faith. He redeems us by reconciling us to God, by winning us out of our distrust and fear of the Holy One, by drawing us away from our despairing trust in idols and in self."[4] This transforming loyalty of God is manifest in Jesus Christ's love toward all creation.[5] "Beyond that it became clear to the disciples that Jesus Christ's love

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[1] Niebuhr, "An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought," Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America, XLVIII (January, 1920), 44. Cf. p. 42 *et passim*.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 44.

[3] See *The Meaning of Revelation*, pp. 112-20.

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1. Ibid., pp. 123-25.
2. Ibid., p. 183.
3. Ibid., p. 184.
4. "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 223.
5. Christ and Culture, p. 18.

of men was not merely an illustration of universal benevolence but a decisive act of divine Agape." This love is pitying, giving and forgiving; "it suffers for and in their viciousness and profaneness;" it calls men to repentance, it is the compassion of the Son of God, who "loves man as only God can love, with powerful pity for those who are foundering."[1] Through Christ "the reconciling nature and activity of a God who is Father and Son, and also Holy Spirit" is revealed to the Church.[2] Central to Niebuhr's whole description of the purpose of the church and its ministry is the statement that "love of God and neighbor is the gift given through Jesus Christ by the demonstration in incarnation, words, deeds, death and resurrection that God is love--a demonstration we but poorly apprehend yet sufficiently discern to be moved to a faltering response of reciprocal love."[3]

These two sets of characteristics, self-emptying suffering and unity of will acting toward reconciliation, form a relatively complete designation of the action of God in Christ as Niebuhr describes it.

The Conflict between the Determiner and the Reconciler

Niebuhr was sensitive to the conflict between the power and the Christlike goodness of God. He mentioned it so often that we can assume it was a major problem for him.[4] But when he mentioned the problem he merely left it as a problem, asserting both sets of characteristics simultaneously. A typical example is his statement in the conclusion of Christ and Culture. Having described the omnicausal power as God himself, he asserted that in Christ we are convinced that this same power is loyal and trustworthy. There follows no discussion of how this conviction modifies our concept of the power. We are left with the bald assertion.[1]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 18-19.

[2] Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 20.

[3] Ibid., p. 32.

[4] For example, it is the theme of the first article he published, "An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought"; it is

This assertion is not a sufficient answer to the puzzle, and we wonder whether it satisfied Niebuhr. We know that Luther's distinction between the hidden God of wrath and the hiding God on the cross would not do for Niebuhr. He called such a distinction an untenable dualism, and stressed the unity of the Creator and the Redeemer.[2]

The whole point of the analogy of the Rosetta stone is that it indicates the character of God's action in the world.[3] But if God's

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described as the inevitable, the inescapable, the fundamental problem, and as "the knottiest theological problem raised by the Christ-against-culture movement," in Christ and Culture, pp. 81, 114-15, 158, and 254. Cf. also "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," pp. 372 and 380-82; Meaning of Revelation, pp. 185-90; "Life Is Worth Living," p. 22; "The Nature and Existence of God," Motive, IV (December, 1943), 45.

[1] Christ and Culture, p. 254.

[2] Ibid., pp. 191-93. It is interesting to notice the close parallelism between Niebuhr and Luther here. Both strongly stressed the present power and sovereignty of God, to the point of determinism and ascription to God of activity that is strange to his character revealed in Christ. And both stressed the cross as the revelation of God in humble, non-majestic weakness. In fact, Niebuhr learned much of both emphases from Luther and Calvin. Luther could live with the dualism, explicitly affirming its necessity. Niebuhr could not accept such a dualism, as he said in Christ and Culture, pp. 191-93. He never affirmed its necessity, and always tended to subordinate one or the other side when he spoke of them simultaneously.

[3] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 154.

activity in the world is like his activity in Christ as Niebuhr describes it, then it is not like the hand whose glove is the all-determining power in the world. He empties himself, makes himself of no reputation, refuses to claim the kingly crown, is caused to suffer by our iniquity, is made into a victim by our conflict with him, lives with us in great humility, endures death, all for the sake of his loyalty to us and his reconciliation of us. If God is like this suffering servant, then he is not like the slayer whom we see as the demonic power acting in the Second World War. If this is what the Rosetta stone is like, then it portrays a different kind of God than the power we call fate and chance.

This power and this weakness appear simultaneously at several points in Niebuhr's writings. In _The Meaning of Revelation_, which begins with the hope "that I have not fallen into paradox,"[1] something like paradox occurs in the description of the power of God manifest in Christ. The Rosetta stone is more prominent than the rock in this book. Thus when they meet, the Rosetta stone conquers and the rock is subordinated to it. Having said God must be powerful in order to be God, Niebuhr tries to find God's power in Christ:

> And yet how strangely we must revise in the light of Jesus Christ all our ideas of what is really strong in this powerful world. The power of God is made manifest in the weakness of Jesus, in the meek and dying life which through death is raised to power. We see the power of God over the strong of earth made evident not in the fact that he slays them, but in his making the spirit of the slain Jesus unconquerable. Death is not the manifestation of power; there is a power behind and in the power of death which is stronger than death. We cannot come to the end of the road of our rethinking the ideas of power and omnipotence. We thought that we knew their meaning and find we did not know and do not know now, save that the omnipotence of God is not like the power of the world which is in his power. His power is made perfect in

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[1] _Ibid_., p. viii.

> weakness and he exercises sovereignty more through crosses than through thrones.[1]

This seems to be a full facing up to the fact that the power of God must be the kind of power which "is made manifest in . . . Jesus." If the power of God is like this, then we do not see God in the power that "slays" men, nor in "the power of death," nor in "the power of the world," except as suffering under and then conquering those powers. This must mean, then, that we are to understand the power which we encounter in the world as the power of God only in so far as it acts like the power we see in the activity of Christ. The only power which is of God is the power of meek submission, which conquers by its unforgettable spirit. Yet such a solution is not good enough, for the very reason that led Niebuhr to stress the omnipotence of God so strongly in the first place. It leaves us subject to other powers in the world more than to the power of God. Thus in the very same paragraph we encounter the statement that God's "reality and power is the reality and power of the world," and that He is "the life-giving and death-dealing power."[2] And thus it is understandable that the subsequent writings do not move in the direction of unifying God's revelation in terms of suffering and weakness. Some of the strongest descriptions of the all-inclusive omnipotence of God appear during the decade following this emphasis on the weakness of Christ, and the weakness of Christ is gradually de-emphasized. "We cannot come to the end of our rethinking the ideas of power and omnipotence."[3]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 186-87.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Niebuhr's emphasis shifts from the weakness of Christ to the purpose of Christ's activity--reconciliation of all men and loyalty toward all men. His descriptions of this purpose have already been summarized above.[1] The content of the purpose is to be learned from the Christ of the New Testament, and from the experience of the church as it seeks to respond to this reconciling loyalty in the world. The possibilities for developing the theological and ethical meaning of the reconciling purpose of God in Christ seem to be limitless.

Toward Resolution

Then is not Niebuhr moving toward a highly fruitful solution to the problem of sovereign power and Christlike goodness? Further developed, could not this reconciling purpose provide the unitive revelation of God, of which power and suffering are compatible parts? Niebuhr's writings after his definition of the Rosetta stone in *The Meaning of Revelation* seem at times to move toward such a solution. It may be in keeping with his thought, then, to go beyond his explicit statements in order to make the proposal that the central image of the reconciling activity of the sovereign God as revealed in Christ provides a feasible solution to the problem of the sovereign power and Christlike goodness of God.

The weakness of Christ, if understood as a part of the purpose to reconcile sinful men, is not incompatible with God's power. For this weakness is not an end in itself, but a powerful strategy of reconciliation in response to sin. The suffering of Christ puts to shame men who betray and kill, and destroys self-righteousness by revealing the suffering righteousness of God. It offers forgiveness and all-conquering fellowship based on the mercy of God in the very event where men are least righteous and most traitorous. This weakness is compatible with Niebuhr's profound reminder that God judges and destroys idolatries.[1] God's destruction of idolatries, even of those relatively good loyalties which men had absolutized until they took his place, is the destruction of that which alienates men from him and from each other. Hence in one case the power of the Judge, and in another case the weakness of the Servant, can both be compatible if and when they both are strategies of reconciliation. The weakness of Christ is not incompatible with all power, but simply with the alienating use of power which we see in history's Hitlers and in Jews and Christians who betray their responsibility to their sovereign. The cross of Christ, seen as the revelation of the love and mercy and forgiveness, the reconciling and unifying power of God, reveals the character of the power that is God's doing and distinguishes it from other kinds of power.

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[1] See above, pp. 267-69.

> Since it is Christ-in-God to whom account must be rendered the content of responsibility is always mercy. The Church is not responsible for the judgment or destruction of any beings in the world of God, but for the conservation, reformation, redemption and transfiguration of whatever creatures its action touches . . . . nothing belongs to its present responsibility for which it cannot answer to the one who gave his life as ransom and whose whole activity was a seeking and saving of the lost.[2]

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[1] Cf. "Life Is Worth Living," p. 22.

[2] "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," p. 120.

The power that is active in determining our destinies is also compatible with the character of Christ, if our understanding of its nature is transformed so that the reconciling power of God is distinguished from evil powers. For much of the power which determines our destinies is a reconciling power. Even in evil events, there is a power which works to minimize alienation and to maintain the order upon which community can be built. God is in the war just as he is in Christ, if he is the power which stops men from obliterating one another completely, the reconciler who forces enemies to need one another and persuades them to build political and economic and ecclesiastical communities across national boundaries, and the resurrector who gives new life to the victims. Niebuhr states that the conversionist sees the power which is active in Christ as the same power which is active in the world, the power of the Logos, of the Father and Son together in creation. This power is seen in the "ordering action" which is present in the world.[1] If this concept is explicitly brought into line with the reconciling purpose, then the power of God can be seen in that power which orders the world, structures nations and empires, binds together atoms and galaxies, and determines the order of human existence. But at the same time we can confess that some of the order in the world also has demonic, alienating forces in it, and that not every ruling power in the world may be simply identified with the power of God. Thus the power and sovereignty of God can be at the center without requiring a divine determinism that mixes the Sovereign and the satanic together into one paradoxical lump.

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[1] Christ and Culture, pp. 192-93.

Niebuhr does indeed move toward a definition of the unity of God in terms of his reconciling purpose revealed in Christ. But he seems to hesitate when this definition demands that some powers are not of God; he seems unwilling to allow the Calvinistic concept of all-inclusive omnipotence to be transformed by the Rosetta stone. The struggle can be seen in his writings subsequent to The Meaning of Revelation.

A central theme in the essay, "War as the Judgment of God," is the suffering of innocent men in the war.[1] The article describes God both as the judge, whose will is being done when innocent people are being crucified by the war,[2] and as the vicarious sufferer, who receives the lashes of this terrible scourge: "To see God in the war as vicarious sufferer and redeemer, who is afflicted in all the afflictions of his people, is to find hope along with broken-heartedness in the midst of disaster."[3] Niebuhr replies to criticism of this article by holding fast to his position, and he explains his tenacity by repeating his radically monotheistic conviction that we must see God acting in every event that occurs.[4] He seems to indicate not merely that God is active in every event, but that there is no force in any event in addition to the force of God. Therefore war must be interpreted as divine action and nothing more.[5] Yet he repeatedly asserts that

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1. "War as the Judgment of God," p. 631: "The pains of war do not descend primarily on the unjust but on the innocent."

2. Ibid., p. 630.

3. Ibid., p. 633.

4. "Is God in the War," p. 954.

5. Ibid.

"Christians in particular must be convinced by their whole gospel that judgment cannot be separated from redemption, that the harshness of God is not antagonistic to his love but subordinate to it, that divine 'penology' is reconstructive and not vindictive in its nature."[1] The same point appears in his response to criticism: "I was concerned to point out in the article in question that judgment in the Scriptures meant the corrective action of a God who is loyal to his creatures."[2]

The same sort of attempt to hold together the concept of the Determiner of destiny and the concept of the suffering servant by means of the overarching redemptive purpose appears in The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry.[3] Niebuhr speaks of "the Source and Center of all being, the Determiner of destiny," at the same time that he emphasizes love and loyalty and reconciliation. In this case the Determiner seems to be more prominent than the Reconciler, and Niebuhr utters a strong statement of the difficulty of loving or even accepting this One who determines the thus and so-ness of each man's particular existence. The temptation to despair appears acute:

> The problem of man is how to love the One on whom he is completely, absolutely dependent; who is the Mystery behind the mystery of human existence in the fatefulness of its selfhood, of being this man among these men, in this time and all time, in the thus and so-ness of the strange actual world. It is the problem of reconciliation to the One from whom death proceeds as well as life, who makes demands too hard to bear, who sets us in the world where our beloved neighbors are the objects of seeming animosity, who appears as God of wrath as well as God of love. It is the problem that arises in its acutest form when life itself becomes a problem, when the goodness of existence is

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[1] "War as the Judgment of God," p. 631. Cf. "The Triad of Faith," p. 10.

[2] "Is God in the War?" p. 953.

[3] The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 36-37.

> questionable, as it has been for most men at most times; when the ancient and universal suspicion arises that he is happiest who was never born and he next fortunate who died young.[1]

This is the problem, stated with a power and a passion. The goodness of existence is often questionable, and sometimes definitely evil. If God is the one and the only one who causes all existence to be the particular way it is, then his goodness is often questionable and sometimes definitely evil. The evil of his action is evident not only by subjective human standards. It is evil by the standard of God's own central act in our history, his act in Jesus Christ. If the action of Jesus Christ reveals the goodness of God, then the goodness of God is like the Suffering Servant whose will is reconciliation and loyalty. And if the goodness of God is like this Reconciler, then it is not like many events that determine the destiny of men, that plant hate and bitterness, that are indeed the very opposite of the goodness of God. These events are evil. Are we prevented from insisting that they are not the action of God?

Pause in the Fifties

But in the fifties Niebuhr held back from saying this. He seemed to be prevented from resolving the conflict. He seemed to retreat from emphasizing God's reconciling intention and distinguishing this intention from some of the world's events. The conflict between the power and the goodness of God seemed to grow more acute, as in the passage above from The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry. How is man to love the Creator of an existence that often seems more evil than good?

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[1] Ibid., pp. 36-37. Cf. Responsible Self, p. 140.

Was his holding back necessary? Were the reasons for this hesitance so unavoidably compelling that we must not seek to follow through on the constructive solution toward which Niebuhr pointed?

At least four possible reasons for Niebuhr's retreat could be suggested. The first reason has already been examined above. It is his concern to oppose ethical dualism with a theocentric ethic and his resultant reaction toward monism. He seems at times to assume that the only alternative to the divinity of all power is non-theocentric dualism.[1] Yet Niebuhr's own transformationist ethic, with its fundamental concepts of a corrupted creation, of redemptive reconciliation, of the triad of faith, and of persons in community, suggests a theocentric alternative which is neither a dualism nor a monism. It suggests a community of persons who are inseparably bound to one another but free to rebel and surprise one another. It suggests something like the process ontology of Whitehead and the interpersonal dialogue of Buber, though Niebuhr refused to hold himself to a systematic ontology.[2] This transformationist ontology is not compatible with the monistic absolute idealism toward which he seems to move in the fifties, especially in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture.[1] But transformationism certainly need not suggest that a part of life exists over which God is not sovereign. If we affirm that there are rebellious powers in the world, we need not deny that they are still limited by God and that God has already won the ultimate battle.

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[1] See "War as the Judgment of God," p. 631, and "Is God in the War?" p. 954.

[2] Besides his explicit comments about indebtedness to Buber, Bergson, and Whitehead, Niebuhr also speaks often of the action of God in terms such as emergent transformation. Emergent transformation is a process concept with an insistence on some discontinuity or revolutionary transformation. See, for instance, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," Girvetz, pp. 323-24; "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," Girvetz, pp. 331-33; The Kingdom of God in America, pp. xii-xvi, 9-12; "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," Religion in Life, VIII (Winter, 1939), 46; "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,"

Transformationism sees God as the sovereign power who fulfills and transforms the created and fallen order; he neither destroys the powers of this order nor divinizes them in their present form, but works among them to cause a revolution toward the reconciliation that we see in Christ.[2] Thus we do encounter God as the sovereign power in the world, whose sovereignty is not threatened by the existence of worldly powers that rebel and serve evil ends. God is and will always be Lord. Transformationism recognizes rebellious powers without giving them such supreme status that theocentricity is lost in dualism.

Furthermore, as another theocentric conversionist, St. Augustine, might remind us, there is a theocentric way to respond to powers and persons other than God. There is one Sovereign who gives and seeks to guide the freedom of all responses, even of responses to those with whom he is doing battle. We must respond to powers other than God as did Jesus Christ toward those with whom he struggled, against

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pp. 114-16; "The Norm of the Church," Journal of Religious Thought, IV (Autumn-Winter, 1946-47), 10; The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, pp. 28-31, 58, 78-79; Responsible Self, p. 167.

[1] See Daniel Day Williams, Review of Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, pp. 99-101.

[2] Cf. Christ and Culture, pp. 190ff.

and for whom he preached, whom he tried to convert, and whom he forgave from the cross, always seeking the reconciliation which was his Father's will. Such a response is a part of our theocentric response to God, guided by his will as are all Christian responses. Seeing the unity of God in terms of his powerful reconciling transformation of the world does not threaten theocentricity.

The real threat to theocentricity is a non-Christlike picture of God. An understanding of God as pure and abstract all-determining omnipotence makes theocentricity become ennervating and oppressive; it drives men to anti-theistic reaction. On the other hand, to counter abstract omnipotence with an understanding of God as the powerful reconciler seen in Israel, in Christ, and in present actuality is no threat to theocentricity; it distinguishes the liberating sovereignty of God from the oppressive sovereignty of fatalistic determinism.

Hans Frei suggests a second possible reason for what he diagnoses as the central problem in Niebuhr's theology: failure to relate the power and the goodness of God.[1] Frei sees the problem of power and goodness as a problem of the unity of the Trinity, and he suggests that Niebuhr's method is the sort that allows only an economic Trinitarianism:

> The greatest difficulty in this position, as I see it, is that it does not allow us to grasp firmly the unity of the three Persons in the one Deity. . . .
>
> One may make the same criticism by observing that the position of economic Trinitarianism cannot observe the rule that "the external effects of the Trinity are undivided."[2]

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[1] Frei, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-105.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Frei bases this conclusion on his understanding of Niebuhr's valuational and existential method.[1] His conclusion is certainly correct in contending that Niebuhr rejects distinctions "between metaphysical or immanent perfections and moral or relational attributes of God." Frei is right that Niebuhr rejects doctrines of God's being apart from relation to other selves.[2] But if our understanding of Niebuhr's social existentialism is correct, then this does not mean that Niebuhr could speak only of moral relations which are not real disclosures of God himself. For Niebuhr's kind of existentialism defines revelation as the disclosure of the self of God _in_ moral action in community. Not merely an external attribute, but the faithful Self is revealed in Jesus Christ. He himself is faithful to his revelation. This is relational objectivity in the sense that the object itself is in direct, active and noetic, though relative, relation to the knower.[3] The unity of the three _personae_ in one essence then becomes the unity of three ways of being in one Self. The unity of the Trinity is the unity of a self, and this self is revealed as unified in the sense of being faithful to himself as revealed.[4] Language about the distinction between metaphysical and relational attributes is dissolved into an interpersonal existentialism, but this by no means threatens the ability to speak of the unity of God as the faithfulness of a revealed self. It threatens only talk about relations in God which are not a part of his self-revelation in our history.[1]

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[1] _Ibid._, pp. 99f.

[2] _Ibid._, p. 98.

[3] _The Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 129, 145f., 152f., and 167f.; "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 226; _Christ and Culture_, pp. 22-25 and 245-47.

[4] _The Meaning of Revelation_, pp. 124-29, 154, 158, 165ff., and 183ff.

Niebuhr's third apparent reason for hesitating from developing the resolution was his reaction in the fifties against Barth's Christocentrism. But he overreacted, partly because that is almost inevitable in the dialectic of reaction, and partly because he purposely intended to overreact in order to counterbalance Barth's Christocentrism.

It is obvious, of course, that Niebuhr can not accept Barth's exclusivism or his dogmatic tendency to describe eternal verities that are not revealed within the limits of relative history.[1] But Barth also provides much constructive description of the activity of God in history which can fit within Niebuhr's relativism, and which can help relate omnipotence to the reconciling purpose.[2] Yet because Niebuhr felt strongly that the exclusivistic part of Barth's method had overemphasized Christology, and because he wanted to counter this part of Barth's dominance in contemporary theology, he avoided all emphasis on Christology in the decade of the fifties.[3] This is intentional overreaction; the logical working out of the Christological aspects of Niebuhr's method would include the affirmation of part of what Barth had said. A balanced or systematic working out of Niebuhr's criteria for tracing the workings of God would require the correction of the intentional overreaction. It would require the development of those Christological affirmations that do fit with his theological method.

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[1] Claude Welch, In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology (New York, 1952), pp. 250-51 and 272-81, has developed a doctrine of the unity of one person in three modes of being on the sort of constructive basis here suggested, though I believe he has gone beyond Niebuhr's limits for what is revealed in our relative history. Thus in so far as Welch did not exceed Niebuhr's limits, his essay may be taken as a constructive development along the basic lines suggested by Niebuhr's interpersonal existential relativism. Niebuhr's interpersonal existentialism sees God as a self revealed centrally for us in Jesus Christ's faithful reconciling and transforming action toward us, as perceived in our inner history. In this revelation God gives himself to us and he will be faithful to this revelation, including to his character as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This closely resembles Welch's analytic approach which concentrates on the activity of one Self in three ways of being in one central revealing act, and which then looks for the same one Self in all of life. It is true that Niebuhr's article, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," takes a primarily synthetic rather than analytic approach. (See Welch's criticism, pp. 227-29). But Niebuhr himself explicitly defines this synthetic approach as limited to the question of the essay. That question is the synthetic question of the unity of three kinds of historic Christianity. He states explicitly that he is not discussing the question of "the existential problem of God and of man's relation to him," which "leads inevitably to the question about the deity" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The latter question is "the problem and the doctrine of the Trinity," and the question "of greater importance." ("The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," p. 372). Niebuhr did not work out a balanced statement on that more important problem. But if he had worked it out while following his existential and historical method, then Welch's basic approach on the unity, but not on the internal relations, should have been the logical result. The beginnings of such a development in Niebuhr's thought have been indicated above.

Niebuhr's reaction against Barthian Christocentrism was also a reaction against the tendency toward "unitarianism of the Son," whose error is "denial of the deity of the Creator."[1] But "unitarianism of the Son" is not what we are proposing. Faith that God always wills reconciliation as revealed in Christ and in Israel does not threaten the deity of the Creator. It affirms that the Creator is the ultimate source and the direct sustainer and limiter of all that is, the power that is working for order and reconciliation in all that is, the one who is ultimately victorious in his battle with evil and who is able to set limits for that battle, the one who acts and who reveals himself in ways that we had neither dreamed nor desired, but who does nothing that is unfaithful to his self-revelation in Jesus Christ and in Israel. This way of designating the deity of the Creator is precisely what Niebuhr's Rosetta stone method suggests. It is not exclusively Christocentric but fundamentally theocentric and trinitarian, demanding merely that neither Father nor Son nor Spirit works in a way incompatible with the character of the one Self who reveals himself many places, including fully in his triune activity in Christ. This is simply basic to the unity of the Trinity; the Creator does not work in a way that contradicts the Redeemer, nor vice versa. Within that personal unity, God continues to surprise men by working new works, speaking new judgments against exclusivisms and provincialisms, revealing himself in ways that are new but still fulfillments of his faithfulness as already revealed. Such a trinitarian conception should satisfy Niebuhr's concern that God be able to be known as ruling in nature and history, which is Niebuhr's basic criterion for a method that does not deny the deity of the Creator.[1]

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[1] Responsible Self, pp. 13, 15, 66, 131, and 158.

[2] For example, Barth's explicit warning to keep our understanding of God's omnipotence to the definite and delimited use which He has chosen in His revelation, and not to allow our understanding of God's omnipotence to run loose among everything we call power. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, II/1 (New York, 1957), pp. 232, 287ff., 312-15, 465-68, 472-77, 524, and 531-33. And also Barth's extensive analyses of the meaning of God's reconciling activity in Christ which appear in his fourth volume.

[3] Niebuhr explained his relation to Barth in an unpublished address at the Monday Noon Forum, Union Theological Seminary, Spring, 1960. Cf. also his hints along this line in "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," especially p. 379, and "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 249-50. Cf. Frei, p. 101; and Responsible Self, p. 158. Niebuhr's writings indicate that such counteremphasis was probably always somewhat present in his thought, but that the decision to ignore Barth's Christology most likely came between the writing of the first six chapters and the last chapter of Christ and Culture.

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[1] "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," p. 376, *et passim*. See also "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

Hence Niebuhr's reaction against Barth and Christocentrism does not contain a permanent reason for refraining from developing the Rosetta stone method. It does not prohibit appreciation of Barth's constructive emphasis on reconciliation, as, for example, in The Meaning of Revelation. A further development of the Rosetta stone method would not accept Barth's exclusivism or dogmatism, it would be consistent with Niebuhr's intention, it would combat unitarianism and tri- or di-theism, and it would develop further the description of God's reconciling action in Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the world.

There is a fourth reason for Niebuhr's hesitation in the fifties. In his reaction against Barth, he began to emphasize the beyondness and the universality of God in a way that seemed to contradict his own existential historical relativism. He began to speak sometimes almost as if any statements about God revealing himself with concreteness and content were to be rejected as idolatrous. The most obvious example of this way of speaking is Radical Monotheism and Western Culture.

Niebuhr's major writings prior to Radical Monotheism speak of God in concrete, Biblical and historical terms as the personal living God who acts in history to do particular things like judging our disorder and reconciling us to one another and to Himself. Niebuhr states that Paul Tillich's emphasis on Being is inferior to Buber's and Barth's emphasis on the personal God who hides and reveals himself.[1] Concerning the idea that God is the One beyond the many, Niebuhr insists that God has met us in Christ "not as the one beyond the many, but as the one who acts in and through all things," whose unity is a single will directed toward reconciliation.[2] It comes as a surprise, then, to find that Radical Monotheism speaks of God most often in the terms which Niebuhr has previously called abstract and pre-Christian. His key term, radical monotheism, is defined as "value dependence and as loyalty to One beyond all the many."[3] This One beyond the many is defined as the principle of being and the principle of value. The believer who affirms faith in God is affirming that

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[1] "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," pp. 373 and 379-80.

> the principle of being is identified with the principle of value and the principle of value with the principle of being. . . . As faith loyalty, it is directed toward the principle and the realm of being as the cause for the sake of which it lives. . . . On the one hand it is the principle of being itself; on the other, it is the realm of being. Whether to emphasize the one or the other may be unimportant, since the principle of being has a cause, namely the realm of being, so that loyalty to the principle of being must include loyalty to its cause; loyalty to the realm of being, on the other hand, implies keeping faith with the principle by virtue of which it is, and is one realm.[4]

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[1] See Niebuhr's review of The Protestant Era, by Paul Tillich, Religion in Life, XVIII (Spring, 1949), 292; review of Systematic Theology, loc. cit., p. 49.

[2] The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 183-85: "Beyond the many and conditioned beings for which and among which we lived, beyond eternal objects and ideas we have learned [in our pre-Christian knowledge] to posit one unconditioned being. We thought about a single principle which might serve as the source of the unities we find in our experience. But though the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ met that expectation he fulfilled it in another manner than we anticipated, and made necessary a change in all our thinking about the unity of the world. He met us not as the one beyond the many but as the one who acts in and through all things, not as the unconditioned but as the conditioner. The oneness of the person was the oneness of a will directed towards unity of all things in our world."

[3] Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 24.

[4] Ibid., p. 33.

When radical monotheism has completed its critique of idolatries, one thing remains--"the principle of being itself."[1]

Throughout his writings, one of Niebuhr's major achivements is his way of affirming that God discloses himself within relative history. The relative is not to be scorned. God and history belong together. Therefore it is a surprise to notice that in Radical Monotheism, Niebuhr speaks of God as "the universal" in a sense that seems almost to reject the relative and the particular. He denies, as we expect him to, that any particular, relative cause is God or is God's exclusive representative. But he seems to go beyond what we expect by denying that any representation of God whatever is more adequate than any others.

> When the principle of being is God--i.e., the object of trust and loyalty--then he alone is holy and ultimate sacredness must be denied to any special being. No special places, times, persons, or communities are more representative of the One than any others are. No sacred groves or temples, no hallowed kings or priests, no festival days, no chosen communities are particularly representative of Him in whom all things live and move and have their being.[2]

If all things are equally non-representative of God, where then is relative faith? Where is any concrete knowledge of the One to whom we are loyal? God seems to become the abstract Universal Transcendent. He seems removed so far from discriminating relation to concrete history that no "relative value system" can be evaluated as "above the others, as when the human-centered value system is regarded as superior to a life-centered system."[3] We expect Niebuhr to say none is absolute save God, but he seems here to say nothing is even relatively more valuable than anything else.

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[1] Ibid., p. 37.

[2] Ibid., p. 52. Cf. Ibid., pp. 24, 37, and The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 36.

[3] Ibid., p. 112.

It is not surprising that when God becomes so abstract, something more concrete becomes the hero of the drama. That something is faith, and particularly the radical faith called monotheism. Tolstoi, Royce, and the negative literature of disillusionment are used in an apologetic for faith, demonstrating that faith is an inescapable and universal human necessity.[1] Niebuhr explicitly states that he is now defining God in terms of this general sort of faith.[2] Although he has previously described the transformation of culture as a work or gift of God, or as that which happens through the revelation of God in Christ, he now almost makes a human faith, radical monotheism, the major transformer.[3] The central battle is fought between monotheism and other forms of human faith.[4] Niebuhr seems to be making the error which he criticizes so strongly in the Meaning of Revelation,[5] and to be falling under his own strictures against the perversion of evangelical ethics--transferring God's attributes to faith:

> This seems to happen when faith is separated from its divine object and when the subjective condition of confidence is made the object of trust. Then we say to ourselves that we are saved by faith rather than that God alone saves us and allow ourselves to do whatever we can do with confidence rather than those things we can do with trust in God, the Father of Jesus Christ, and in loyalty to Christ.[6]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 18-23.

[2] Ibid., p. 24. He warns that the method he is here using is not the only method he considers valid.

[3] Ibid., pp. 49ff.

[4] Ibid., p. 24.

[5] The Meaning of Revelation, pp. 22-38.

[6] "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 224.

And finally, the theologian who has stressed the centrality of Christ in our relative history, who has defined this history in terms of the self-manifestation of the Living God within the inner history of a historically limited people, who has described with power the way this person transforms all our ideas, now seems to shift his approach. Christ seems to be not so much a particular person as a representation of what is already present everywhere. And what is already present everywhere is radical monotheism. Jesus Christ is one of the incarnations of radical monotheism. His uniqueness and special meaning are not found in his revelation of God or in his place in the history of God's dealings with us, but in his total trust and universal loyalty as a man toward the One beyond the many, the principle and realm of being. The chapter on Christ begins: "Radical monotheism, as I have tried to define it, is a form of human faith, that is, of the confidence and fidelity without which men do not live."[1] The "emergence" of this form of universal human faith is the content of the incarnation. "We may use the theological word 'incarnation' in speaking of the coming of radically monotheistic faith into our history, meaning by it the concrete expression in a total human life of radical trust in the One and of universal loyalty to the realm of being."[2] In this sense "incarnate" means "permeating all of life," so that we see incarnation more in Jesus than in the Greeks because although monotheism was also present in the Greeks, it did not permeate the whole of their life.[3]

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[1] Radical Monotheism, p. 38.

[2] Ibid., p. 40.

[3] Ibid.

> Jesus Christ represents the incarnation of radical faith to an even greater extent than Israel. The greatness of his confidence in the Lord of heaven and earth as fatherly in goodness toward all creatures, the consistency of his loyalty to the realm of being, seem unqualified by distrust or by competing loyalty. . . . The word of God as God's oath of fidelity became flesh in him in this sense that he was a man who single-mindedly accepted the assurance that the Lord of heaven and earth was wholly faithful to him and to all creatures, and who in response gave wholehearted loyalty to the realm of being.[1]

Does this mean Niebuhr has decided to speak of God only as the Transcendent One beyond all the many? Does it mean he has rejected his way of describing God's commitment to reconciliation? Has he rejected his existential and historical understanding of revelation with content? Most decidedly not. To represent Niebuhr that way would be a gross distortion.

Radical Monotheism was written for an audience whose relation to the inner history of Christianity included unfaith and ignorance.[2] The book states that it intends to study the role of faith in contemporary civilization,[3] that it is speaking abstractly,[4] and that this is not the only way to carry out the task of theology.[5] Niebuhr is here speaking in a different way for a special context—a context in which he is describing an aspect of civilization before a non-Christian audience.

Furthermore, in the climax of the main essay Niebuhr explicitly states that he has intentionally been speaking in an abstract way.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

He then demonstrates a way of speaking more concretely, and he sounds like the Niebuhr to whom we are accustomed.[1] He speaks of the revelation of a "faithful self" who is concrete and interpersonal more than theoretical and abstract, who is First Person more than he is principle of being. And he states the priority clearly: "To say that God makes himself known as First Person is to say that revelation means less the disclosure of the essence of objective being to minds than the demonstration to selves of faithful, truthful being."[2] We should then accept this as the mode of theological discourse Niebuhr still prefers. We must understand the major part of the other emphasis as preliminary and situational. The main essay ends with this existential breakthrough at the climax, just as Niebuhr's own position and major intention are prepared for and then allowed to burst forth in the final sections of Meaning of Revelation and Christ and Culture. Niebuhr is still primarily concerned about the Living God who discloses himself as loyal and faithful in Jesus Christ, and in the unfathomable power which is present in every "event in nature or in social history."[3]

To understand Niebuhr otherwise is to distort his intent. It is to make the same error Willem Zuurdeeg made. Zuurdeeg, in his review of Radical Monotheism, concentrated on what seems to be an honest representation of some of the book's distinctive emphases: the One beyond the many, the principle of being itself, and the principle of value.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 44-48.

[2] Radical Monotheism, p. 46.

[3] Ibid., p. 47.

> These expressions mean that God is so high that he is even beyond being, beyond value. . . . A next step is taken with the help of the term incarnation. Niebuhr does not have in mind God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, but the incarnation of radical faith into human history, in Israel and also in Jesus Christ. . . . What is going to happen to Christian theology if one means by incarnation not an act of God, but something which occurs to faith? What can a Christian do with faith, if it is detached from Jesus Christ and becomes an agency which gives form to an otherwise formless sense of the holy? . . . It is a combination of Thomistic, Tillichian, and positivistic elements. . . . Thomism is presented to us in this book in the modern, Tillichian form. See the term "Being itself," the notion of "beyond" in "beyond being" and "beyond value," and the concept of radical faith, which is strongly akin to "ultimate concern."[1]

But Niebuhr was horrified that someone should so express what he could only think was a radical distortion of his basic position. He dispatched a retort to be printed in the next issue of the same journal. Though showing restraint, this retort revealed a somewhat heated sense of having been betrayed. The tone is unprecedented in Niebuhr's always appreciative and reconciliatory manner. He could find things to appreciate in fundamentalists and pantheists, but to Zuurdeeg he said:

> You seem to have read something into the book that I didn't mean to put there. . . . For instance, on the very first page you write that I start "with the assertion that human beings are fundamentally moved by vague feelings, such as a sense of the holy." Now where do I start with that? I start with the assertion that to be a human self is to rely on something as meaning-giving and as the object of loyalty. I am neither a philosopher of religion nor a phenomenologist of religion but a moral theologian and I start with what is central in my understanding of man as active being.
>
> . . . .
>
> The argument about "being" is another matter. I think my understanding of faith as attached to the Creator of all things, the beginning and the end, "the source of being" and the "center of value" derives from the Scriptures more than you give me credit for. As for the theologians and

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[1] *Op. cit.*, pp. 215-16.

> philosophers who have influenced my formulation, I am more aware of the significance of Augustine, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards in my background than of Plato, Thomas and Tillich.[1]

What has happened here seems clear. Radical Monotheism does emphasize the motif of the beyondness of the One more than Niebuhr realized. He most clearly did not want such a motif to replace his basic method in his major writings. And he was shocked when a responsible scholar in a responsible journal thought such a replacement had happened.

The necessary conclusion for the balanced interpretation of Niebuhr should be clear: The basic thrust of Niebuhr's thought is to see God as the faithful sovereign who reveals himself in particular actions within relative history among communities of selves. The reconciling purpose of God revealed in Jesus Christ is seen as the particular Rosetta stone, the analogy, by which we trace the workings of the living Lord. This basic method is the way of the sovereignty of God, who is truly sovereign and powerful in the faithful way he has revealed. This method does not incorporate into the sovereign, living God an abstract, universal omnipotence against which perceptive Christians will cry in despair: "This is not the Father of Jesus Christ!"

Idolatry according to Niebuhr's historical relativism is committed not by speaking of God concretely, but by substituting some other being for the living, faithful God who has revealed himself concretely in Christ. God reveals himself and acts in new ways elsewhere, but always as faithful to his self-revelation in Christ; one can speak concretely and biblically of God's action. What one can not do without committing idolatry is to equate God with one's understanding of God, or to claim that a particular revelatory action excludes all other revelation.

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[1] Niebuhr, "Critic's Corner," pp. 359-60.

In sum, Niebuhr himself provides the basis for a constructive theology and ethics that can work out those problems that appeared in the fifties. The problems and obstacles were caused by temporary situational factors that were not inherent in his thought, and by a concept of universal omnipotence and omnificence not compatible with other essential features of his theology. None of these obstacles seems insurmountable. Niebuhr's faith is not an abstract concept of sovereignty but a concrete, living Christian faith in the loyal Sovereign who has the power to accomplish what he has promised in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and who does not violate his faithfulness to himself as revealed. Niebuhr himself shows the way to overcome the temporary obstacles of the fifties.

The Responsible Self and the Reconciling Power

The Responsible Self is the last word we hear from Niebuhr.[1] Here he affirms more thoroughly than ever the universality of God's rule: The responsible self is not whole and unified until it has faced the problem of "discerning one action, one intention, one final context of all the actions upon me, whether these issue from natural powers or from men. . . ."[2] Niebuhr explains that responsibility

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[1] It was published posthumously in 1963. Richard Reinhold Niebuhr promises a "volume of H. Richard Niebuhr's essays, sermons, and other literary remains" in the future (*Responsible Self*, p. 3).

[2] *Responsible Self*, p. 125.

"accepts the presence only of One action in all actions upon it."[1] The ethos of the Old Testament saves us "from a polytheism into which we Gentile nations are forever tempted to fall" by centering in

> responsiveness to omnificence, to the all-doer. There is no evil in the city but the Lord has done it. No nation exists that he has not called into being. It is he that besets man behind and before and lays his hand upon him; from him no flight is possible though one makes one's home in Sheol. To discern the ways of God not in supernatural but in all natural and historic events, to respond to his intention present in and beyond and through all finite intentions, that is the way of responsibility to God. It is a way of universal responsibility because there is no action in the whole extent of actuality in which the universal intention, the meaning of the One beyond the many, is not present.[2]

Yet while affirming in this radical way God's universal omnificence, The Responsible Self moves decisively toward the sort of resolution we have suggested. The development is so clear and so consistent that Niebuhr is obviously working out the problem in a conscious way. The result is an outline for further development of Niebuhr's theological ethics.

First, Niebuhr affirms that there are Assyrians and Pilates who really do have destructive intent, and whose actions are really destructive in a way that differs from God's intent.[3] Niebuhr uses the tenth chapter of Isaiah as paradigmatic for this understanding, just as he did in 1962 in "Illusions of Power."[4] To affirm that there are other powers in the world doing particular actions that differ from what God intends is not to deny God's sovereignty. All actions are the action of God in the sense that God intends something for them and in them; but this is different from saying God determines and prefers all actions to be exactly as they are. God's intention is the "final context" even if not the immediate content of all actions. The basic question is "our sense of the ultimate context" which unifies all these particular actions.[1] One's understanding of one's history and of the ultimate context of one's life profoundly determines one's responses to particular situations, as for example is demonstrated by analytic psychology.[2] For the Christian, God's action is the ultimate context. The action of God is clearly distinct from much that the Assyrians are doing; but the action of God is always present even if temporarily hidden.[3] When Isaiah faces the Assyrian invasion, the first thing he offers is

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[1] Ibid., p. 126.

[2] Ibid., p. 170.

[3] Ibid., pp. 166 and 169.

[4] See chapter viii above.

> an interpretation of what is going on. The invasion is to be understood, as he makes quite clear, as act of God. Israel is to ask, What is God doing? The divine intention Isaiah points out is directed toward the purgation or the chastisement of Israel. Israel is therefore to forget all its stereotyped interpretations of such encounters as attacks of the ungodly on the godly. It is itself the godless people that must be reformed, called back to its covenants, to its own laws and ways of justice. But this divine intention, says the prophet, is to be radically distinguished from the intentions of Assyria and its leaders, who are godless, too, though in another way. The destructive intentions of Assyria are one thing; the holy, saving intentions of God are another. The meet, the fitting response of Israel, must be to the infinite intention in the first place, to the finite intention only secondarily. That means that the first response, the fitting action in the critical hour, is to be internal reformation; defense against Assyria is a secondary thing.[4]

Second, Niebuhr directly rejects the concept of the Determiner of Destiny if it is understood in a deterministic fashion. The decisive question, he says, is how the character of God is understood. It is not whether God is acting in what is going on, but how he is acting.

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[1] Responsible Self, pp. 98-107 and 115ff.

[2] Ibid., pp. 102-05.

[3] Ibid., pp. 165-67.

[4] Ibid., p. 169.

> More important, however, is the question how the determining power, the One who acts in all the many, is understood. When this One is understood, with the use of the symbols of making and of design, as the predesigner, the foreordainer of all that happens, then indeed nothing but fatalism could result from an ethics of response to God. Then Judas' treachery is predesigned, and then Russia's attack on the West is foreordained, and you and I play out the roles which have been written down for us in the script.[1]

Third, Niebuhr defines the sovereignty of God as dynamic, living, and personal rather than machine-like and impersonal. God's sovereignty has the particular character that we see revealed in Israel and in Jesus Christ rather than in the determinism of a predesigned machine.

> But such a Determiner of Destiny is not the One to whom Jesus Christ made his responses; nor is he the God of Isaiah; nor would he be One to whom we have access. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the loving Dynamic One, who does new things, whose relation to his world is more like that of father to his children than like that of the maker to his manufactures; it is more like that of the ruler to his realm than like that of the designer to his machines. The symbols fatalism uses to interpret what is happening do not fit the situation.[2]

Fourth, Niebuhr is defining the character of the sovereign by referring to the central story of our life in the Christian community, the story of the prophets and apostles. Niebuhr develops his theological ethics by drawing his guiding images from those events in the relative history of the Christian community where God reveals himself to that community. Any further development of his ethics must be consistent with that method, as Niebuhr here illustrates. He sees the biblical story as his guide; and he sees it as one story including prophets as well as apostles, Joseph and Isaiah as well as Jesus and John. Jesus Christ is the central image, but Niebuhr does not turn Jesus into an object of worship or a religious ideal; Jesus Christ is the central disclosure of the character of the mighty Yahweh whose power is also seen in the Exodus and even in the Assyrians.

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[1] Ibid., p. 173. Cf. p. 165.

[2] Ibid., p. 173. The second sentence is probably a misprint in the book; Niebuhr would characteristically say "the living Dynamic One."

Fifth, the character of God's power that Niebuhr sees in Israel, Assyria, and Jesus is precisely the pattern of reconciliation that we have been pointing to. Niebuhr begins The Responsible Self by explaining that he calls himself a Christian

> simply because I also am a follower of Jesus Christ, though I travel at a great distance from him not only in time but in the spirit of my traveling; because I believe that my way of thinking about life, myself, my human companions and our destiny has been so modified by his presence in our history that I cannot get away from his influence; and also because I do not want to get away from it; above all, I call myself a Christian because my relation to God has been, so far as I can see, deeply conditioned by this presence of Jesus Christ in my history and in our history.[1]

And then he explains what he understands to be "the cause of Jesus Christ" with which "I identify myself."

> That cause I designate simply as the reconciliation of man to God. The term doubtless needs much explanation. It is used in many contexts and can carry with it overtones of guilt feelings, of ideas of blood atonement, etc. . . . I am quite certain that reconciliation, as the establishment of friendship between God and man--between the power by which all things are and this human race of ours--has more aspects to it than have been dreamed of in our theologies. Jesus Christ is for me, as for many of my fellow Christians, the one who lived and died and rose again for this cause of bringing God to men and men to God and so also of reconciling men to each other and to their world. The establishment of this friendship is to me the key problem in human exis-

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[1] Ibid., p. 43.

> tence. Because through Jesus Christ—his fate—as well as by him—that is, his ministry—this has become evident to me; because in him I see the prospect of my own reconciliation; because I have been challenged to make this cause my own—therefore I call myself a Christian.[1]

2 Reconciliation as it occurs in Christ is more than the theories of reconciliation express: "How Jesus Christ in history, and the symbolic Christ within, reconciles men to God, or God to men, or accomplishes the double reconciliation of each to each, Christians cannot easily say."[2] Nevertheless, the reality itself is the central event in the story of our life.

> However adequate or inadequate our theories of at-onement or reconciliation may be, the fact remains: the movement beyond resignation to reconciliation is the movement inaugurated and maintained in Christians by Jesus Christ. By Jesus Christ men have been and are empowered to become sons of God—not as those who are saved out of a perishing world but as those who know that the world is being saved. That its being saved from destruction involves the burning up of an infinite amount of tawdry human works, that it involves the healing of a miasmic ocean of disease, the resurrection of the dead, the forgiveness of sins, the making good of an infinite amount of irresponsibilities, that such making good is not done except by suffering servants who often do not know the name of Christ though they bear his image—all this Christians know. Nevertheless, they move toward their end and all endings as those who, knowing defeats, do not believe in defeat.[3]

We see here the hope and the strategy of reconciliation that we have seen throughout Niebuhr's writings. We see him developing his definition of the power of the Determiner in precisely the direction we would expect. He is bringing the power of God more in line with the faithful character that Isaiah and the Christian disciples were responding to. God intends reconciliation.

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Finally, Niebuhr also suggests the resolution of the tension between the universality of God and His particular revelation. The universality of God is not an abstract concept; it is his character as seen in the reconciling action in Jesus Christ. God's character is not abstract, universal transcendence, but active creating of universal community.[1] The oneness and universality of God's rule takes on new meaning in the light of the reconciliation in Jesus Christ. Niebuhr speaks of the oneness of God less as the One beyond the many and more as "the One who acts in all the many."[2] And the universality is neither determinism nor a disparagement of the relative. The universality of God means that the ruler of all being is working in all events to create universal community, to reconcile us to Himself, to the world-community he is creating, and to all men. Christians can not boast but can only confess:

> We were blind in our distrust of being, now we begin to see; we were aliens and alienated in a strange, empty world, now we begin sometimes to feel at home; we were in love with ourselves and all our little cities, now we are falling in love, we think, with being itself, with the city of God, the universal community of which God is the source and governor. And for all this we are indebted to Jesus Christ, in our history, and in that depth of the spirit in which we grope with our theologies and theories of symbols. Could it have so happened otherwise; could the same results have been achieved through other means? Are they being produced elsewhere through other means? That seems possible; nevertheless this one is our physician, this one is our reconciler to the Determiner of our Destiny. To whom else shall we go for words of eternal life, to whom else for the franchise in the universal community?[3]

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 86-89.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 173, quoted in full immediately above.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78. These are the concluding words of *The Responsible Self*.

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BIOGRAPHY

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Glen Harold Stassen was born February 28, 1936, in St. Paul, Minnesota. His parents are Harold Edward and Esther Glewwe Stassen, and he has one sister, Kathleen (Mrs. Martin Berger). On August 31, 1957, he married Dorothy Jean Lively; they have two sons, Michael Glen and William Harold.

He attended public schools in South St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1957 he received his B.A. with distinction from the University of Virginia, with a major in physics. He has worked in nuclear physics and in electronics for the Naval Research Laboratory and for Melpar. He attended Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary in New York, receiving his B.D. from Union in 1963. During his seminary studies, he was a minister of the New Salem Baptist Church, Deatsville, Kentucky, and of the Second Baptist Church of Germantown, Philadelphia.

From 1960 to 1963, he was in residence for the Ph.D. degree in Religion at Duke University in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. His major field of study was European and American Protestant Theology and Ethics, and his minor was Political Theory. He held a Duke University Graduate Fellowship, a Lilly Fellowship, a Gurney Harriss Kearns Fellowship, and was Reader in Modern European Christianity for Dr. Hans Hillerbrand.

He wrote the dissertation while serving as part-time Instructor in the Department of Religion of Duke University from 1963 to 1964, and as Assistant Professor of Religion in Kentucky Southern College since 1964. He has published two articles: "A Student Views a Changing World," The Baptist Student, XXXVIII (February, 1959), 10-13, and "Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists," The Mennonite Quarterly Review, XXXVI (October, 1962), 322-48.